

“Also Some Women” (Luke 8:1-3)

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It seems like every year, there are new concerns about how women are treated. Not long ago, there were several stories about people in the entertainment industry who have sexually abused, harassed, or intimidated women. Many women came out and told their stories of how Larry Nassar, a doctor, sexually abused them while they were on the USA Gymnastics team. There has been a lot of talk about how much women get paid in comparison to men. Every time there's an election, there is discussion about how many women are in Congress and if a woman could become president. The women's rights movement has been going on for decades and discussions about women's issues won't stop any time soon.

What these discussions reveal is that many different people assume that women should be treated as well as men. That's hardly a controversial statement today. But if you study history, you know that women were often not treated as well as men. They were often relegated to second class status. The further you go back in history, the more clearly you can see that.

So, what happened between ancient times, when women were treated more like property than adult human beings, and today, when we expect that women will do everything that men do? What caused us to think that women have rights that should be protected?

I'm sure many people today would say the Enlightenment, that period of time beginning roughly in the 1600s and continuing for a couple of centuries. But is that so?

What if the proper grounding for women's rights comes not from the Enlightenment, but from the time when God created human beings in his image? What if a refined understanding of this issue came from the New Testament, which states that all those who are united to Christ have an equal status as “sons,” receiving a full inheritance (Gal. 3:9, 26–29; 4:4–7)?

Today, we're going to look at just three verses from the Gospel of Luke. We had been studying Luke's biography of Jesus for the better part of this year, taking a couple of breaks to look at other passages in the Bible. As we come back to Luke, we'll see how he highlights the role that women played in Jesus' ministry. We'll see that they serve as an example of how people who come to faith are willing to serve Jesus. And we'll think about how the Bible—contrary to what many people might think—shows that women are equal to men in value, and that our

modern views about women, though a bit distorted, are largely due to the influence of Christianity throughout the world.

Before we read today's passage, which is Luke 8:1–3, I want to remind us of what Luke was doing in his Gospel. At the very beginning, he states that his goal was “to write an orderly account” that was based on “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word,” who have delivered their accounts of what Jesus did to those who hadn't personally witnessed such things. So, Luke was writing history. But not just any history. It's theological and religious history. Luke's goal was that his audience “may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:1–4).¹

Luke begins his story by telling about all the events surrounding Jesus' birth. Aside from telling one story about Jesus' childhood, he skips ahead to when Jesus begins his public activity as an adult. Jesus went around healing people and teaching. We're often told that Jesus went around proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The good news is that the kingdom was at hand. The true King had come, and people could enter his kingdom by coming under his reign and rule. People who had been at war with the king could now find peace, which comes through the forgiveness of sins, which is rebellion against the King's rule.

Jesus called a special group of twelve disciples, or followers. But they weren't the only ones following Jesus, as we'll see in this passage. There were other people who followed Jesus, including a group of women.

Let's now read today's passage, Luke 8:1–3:

¹ Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, ² and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³ and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

Luke begins by saying “afterward.” The last episode we saw in Luke was about a woman whom Jesus had forgiven for her sins. She was grateful, and she expressed her love for Jesus in an act of service: washing his feet.

Now, we see Jesus continue to travel throughout Galilee, preaching the “good news of the kingdom of God.” The twelve disciples are with him, but so are some women. They had been

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

healed by Jesus from infirmities and evil spirits. As I said last week, while looking at Revelation 12, evil spirits are real, and there was heightened demonic activity during Jesus' lifetime.² These three women whom Jesus healed followed Jesus, serving him out of gratitude, just like the sinful woman who had been forgiven.

The first woman named is Mary Magdalene, who was from the town of Magdala, on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. She is later mentioned in the Gospels at the time of Jesus' death and resurrection. She witnessed Jesus' death and she saw Jesus after he rose from the grave (Luke 24:1–10; John 19:25; 20:1–2, 11–18). Mary had seven demons driven out of her. Seven is a number of completion or perfection; this might be a way of saying Jesus exorcised all her demons, once and for all.

The second woman is Joanna, who was married to a man named Chuza, who served Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee. Chuza was either the manager of one of Herod's estates or a high-ranking official. Either way, this means that Joanna was a woman of status and some wealth. This shows that not all early Christians were poor.

The third woman is named Susanna. We don't know anything else about her.

As I said earlier, Luke claimed to write history. But some skeptics doubt whether his Gospel, as well as other books in the Bible, are truly historical. Legendary writings during this time wouldn't have such details as all these names, particularly ones that weren't further explained, like Susanna. Luke's writing has an air of history about it, even when he reports miraculous things like exorcisms. The writing style isn't fantastical. It's restrained and fact-oriented. But more importantly, if you were going to fabricate a story about Jesus to make him look more impressive than he was, you would never have women among his followers.

Why is that? People in Jesus' day had a lower view of women. It would have been shocking to learn that Jesus had women following him. Jewish teachers, rabbis, didn't have women accompany them on journeys. Jewish oral tradition taught that women were not to speak in public and shouldn't be taught the Torah, the law that God gave to the Israelites. Women weren't normally allowed to testify in court.³ In John's Gospel, Jesus' own disciples "marveled that he was talking [alone] with a woman" (John 4:27).

² See the sermon I preached on December 23, 2018, "She Gave Birth to a Male Child," <https://wbcommunity.org/she-gave-birth-to-a-male-child>.

³ Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 102.

To be clear, this was a cultural view, not a biblical one. We have to make that distinction when we're thinking about religions and cultures. There's nothing in the Old Testament that suggests that women couldn't be taught or couldn't speak in public. In fact, there are two books in the Old Testament named after exemplary women: Ruth and Esther. I'll say more about this in a moment.

The important thing to note is that Luke's reporting concerning women was not something that he would have created to make the Jesus story more acceptable or believable.

And yet Luke often writes about women in favorable ways. In the first chapter of his Gospel, we have reports of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, who comes across much better than her husband, Zechariah. We also have Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was likely a teenager at that time yet who trusted God when she heard the amazing news that she would become pregnant though she was a virgin. Luke gives favorable reports of a prophetess named Anna (Luke 2:36–38), a widow whose son died (Luke 7:11–17), that sinful woman who had been forgiven (Luke 7:36–50), Mary (not Magdalene), the sister of Martha (Luke 10: 38–42), a widow who gives everything (Luke 21:1–4), and the women who were witnessed Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection (Luke 23:49, 55–56; 24:1–12). This is all the more remarkable given how often the twelve disciples look foolish.

These women flocked to Jesus because they knew his message was good news. He said that all kinds of people could be part of God's kingdom, both men and women, rich and poor, old and young, and Jew and Gentile. Women were not second-class citizens in the kingdom of God. Jesus wasn't afraid to talk to them, teach them, and include them in his ministry.

Jesus knew that both men and women were made in God's image. This is what the first chapter of the Bible says:

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them (Gen. 1:26–27).

In the ancient world, people worshiped many different gods, and they built temples to these gods. In these temples, they would place statues or other physical representations of these gods. The

Bible says that God made the universe to be his temple. And the Bible strictly forbids making physical representations of God, because human beings are made to represent him on Earth. We were made to rule over the world by coming under God's rule. We were made to reflect his glory, to worship him. And we were made after his likeness, which means we were made to be his loving, obedient children. This is true of both men and women.

In the New Testament, it is quite clear that both men and women are part of God's kingdom and have roles to play. Women financially supported Jesus and his apostles. It's possible that they might have served in other ways, perhaps in terms of providing food and clothing for the apostles. Women hosted house churches (1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2). Phoebe was a deacon who probably carried the letter of Romans to its audience (Rom. 16:1–2). Priscilla was involved in ministry with her husband, Aquila (Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Rom. 16:3–4; 1 Cor. 16:19). The apostle Paul called Euodia and Syntyche his “fellow workers” (Phil. 4:2–3).

The Christian view of women was very different from other views of women in the ancient world. It was different from the Greek view. Greek women “lived in semi-seclusion,” had no property rights and could get married and divorced against her wishes.⁴ “The Greek wife had virtually no freedom.”⁵ Greek women were not educated.⁶

The Christian view of women was different than the Roman view of women. Roman women had limited education and property rights. A married woman was under the rule of her husband and control of her husband.

In both Greek and Roman culture, women were often married quite young, sometimes before puberty, which wasn't uncommon in the ancient world. And women were of such low value that they were often killed as infants.⁷ Rodney Stark says, “The exposure of unwanted infants was ‘widespread’ in the Roman Empire, and girls were far more likely than boys to be exposed.”⁸ In fact, there's a letter dated roughly 1 BC, written by a man named Hilarion to what we assume is his wife, Alis, and to Berous and Appollonarion. In the letter, he writes, “I beg and beseech of you to take care of the little child, and as soon as we receive wages I will send them to you. If—good luck to you!—you bear offspring, if it is a male, let it live; if it is a female,

⁴ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 122–23.

⁵ Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*, 98.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁷ Stark, *Triumph*, 126–27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 126. Stark here cites William V. Harris, “Child Exposure in the Roman Empire,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 84:1–22 (specifically page 1).

expose it.”⁹ We assume this man is telling his wife to kill the baby, to expose it to the elements, where it might be eaten by wild animals or starve, if it were female.

Beyond the ancient world, the Christian view of women was and is very different than the ones found in other cultures. In Muslim countries, particularly ones that more closely follow the Qur’an and other Islamic traditions, women have little freedom. Just this year, a small group of women in Saudi Arabia were finally allowed to get driver’s licenses. Less than two hundred years ago, it was common in India for widows to be burned on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands. The practice was outlawed in 1829 by British authorities.¹⁰ The British missionary William Carey played a significant role in helping abolish this practice. In China, the practice of binding women’s feet, supposedly to make them more attractive as they sashayed on their toes, was made illegal in 1912.

Alvin Schmidt, in his book, *How Christianity Changed the World*, asks, “where else do women have more freedom, opportunities and human worth than in countries that have been highly influenced by the Christian ethic?”¹¹ It’s no accident that how women have been treated in the West is very different than how women have been treated elsewhere. And when laws have changed in other countries, it has been due to Western influence. And this is because of the Christian view of women, who are made in the image of God, just as men have been, and who can be children of God and coheirs with Christ if they turn to Jesus in faith.

Again, the Bible says that men and women were created with the same basic purpose. The Bible teaches that men and women have the same problem, which is sin. The reason why bad things happen, including the oppression of women, is because of sin in the world. We were made for a certain purpose, as I said earlier. The problem is that we don’t live according to that purpose. As a punishment, God has removed us from his direct and special presence and he has given us over to our sinful practices. The consequences of sin include fighting, oppression, natural disasters, diseases, and death.

The Bible teaches that the same solution to this problem of sin is available to both men and women. Because we do not tend to love God as we should, because we tend to do wrong, we cannot find our way to God. We cannot earn our own right standing with him. We can’t merit our way to heaven. So, God came down to Earth. Jesus was, of course, male, but he was born of

⁹ Oxyrhynchus papyrus 744, <http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/wlgr/wlgr-privatelife249.shtml>.

¹⁰ Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*, 117.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

a woman, so both men and women played a role in salvation. But this was all God's initiative, God's doing. God sent his Son to the world to live perfectly, fulfilling God's design for humanity. And Jesus, though perfect, was put to death, ultimately as a sacrifice, to pay the penalty for our sin. God is a perfect judge who must punish sin, and Jesus took that punishment on himself willingly. Everyone—man or woman—who trusts Jesus is a child of God and is part of his kingdom. As Paul writes in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek [Gentile], there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

This does not mean, however, that men and women are the same. God made men and women to be similar, yet different. This is true physically and often emotionally. Men and women were made to play different roles. Ben Witherington, a New Testament scholar, writes the following in an article about today's passage:

This does not mean that Jesus abrogated all sexual, social, or creation order distinctions recognized under the Old Covenant. Indeed, it seems rather clear that He affirmed the headship and authority of the man when He chose twelve men from among His disciples to be leaders of the community and that Luke wishes to reaffirm this by giving special stress to the twelve and their distinct roles.¹²

He then adds:

Being Jesus' disciple did not lead these women to abandon their traditional roles in regard to preparing food, serving, etc. Rather, it gave these roles new significance and importance, for now they could be used to serve the Master and the family. The transformation of these women involved not only assuming new discipleship roles, but also resuming their traditional roles for a new purpose.¹³

Christianity doesn't teach, as many people do today, that men and women are alike in every way other than biologically. Men and women play different roles. But this does not mean they have different values. Both have the same worth in God's eyes. This is because our worth isn't based on physical strength, or the role we play, or how much money we have. Our worth is determined by our position in Jesus Christ. That is what makes Christianity unique. We become acceptable to God and a treasured part of his kingdom if we are united to his Son.

So, what do we learn from today's passage?

¹² Ben Witherington III, "On the road with Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and other disciples: Luke 8:1-3, *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*, 70 no. 3 - 4 (1979): 245.

¹³ *Ibid.*: 247.

First, the kingdom of God is for everyone who turns away from patterns of sin and rebellion against God and turns in faith to Jesus. Men, women, rich, poor, old, young, people of different skin colors, ethnicities, backgrounds—all kinds of people will be part of God's kingdom.

Second, we should also see that women played a key role in Jesus' ministry. They supported him financially. They probably served him and his apostles in practical ways. They also were witnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection. Again, if this story were made up, no one would ever think of having women be the key witnesses to Jesus' resurrection.

It's also possible that Luke got some of his information about Jesus from these women. Many scholars believe Luke was able to talk to an elderly Mary about Jesus. He might very well have met Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna.

Third, here's an even more important thing for us to get out of this passage. Notice that the women whom Jesus had healed then followed Jesus and served him. This is the pattern of God's people throughout the Bible. God rescues us from sin and the condemnation that we deserve not so we can live for ourselves. He saves us so that we can serve him. And people who truly realize what God has done for them thankfully and willingly live for him.

So, if you claim to be a Christian, how are you serving God? Are you following the example of these women?

As we come to a new year, what kind of resolution could you make to serve God better?

There are many ways to do this. We can grow in our knowledge of God by reading the Bible and by coming to church to participate in Bible studies and to hear the word of God preached.

We can spend more time in prayer.

We can make sure we're living according to God's word in our homes. The New Testament has many things to say about how husbands and wives should live, how parents should raise their children, and how children should obey their parents.

We can make sure we're living according to God's word at the workplace, working with integrity and, whatever our job is, working as if our boss is Jesus.

We can be more devoted to telling other people about Jesus. To do that, start by praying for those who don't know Jesus. Pray that God would give you new relationships and new opportunities to share your faith. Then make sure you know the gospel. Learn about common

objections to Christianity and how to answer them. I can help you with this. Talk to me if you're interested.

You can find ways to help the poor and needy. Find an organization to donate to or to help through volunteering.

But one of the best ways to serve God is by serving his church.

God has instituted his church as the "place" where he is worshiped, where he is made known, where his people come together and love and serve one another, where disciples are made. And people who truly love God love his church, and they serve in his church.

How would these women serve in a local church? I think they would do what they did for Jesus. They would contribute financially. Giving to the local church is a way of supporting the ministry of the gospel. We turn around and give a good percentage of what comes in to the church to missionaries and Christian organizations. The more money we have, the more we are able to do here and abroad.

These women would meet practical needs at the church, whether that's helping take care of children, helping clean things, organize things, or whatever else they could do. We always have a need for help in very practical ways.

The biggest thing that these women—and all the early disciples showed—was commitment. I'm convinced that one of the biggest idols of our age is the idea that we should always keep our options open, always be free to do whatever we want. And this means that we lack commitment. This is seen in our families, as people walk out of marriages. It's seen at work, as people are not very loyal to their jobs. And it's seen in church.

One of my great frustrations is that Christians aren't more committed to the church. And this is the same frustration that pastors everywhere experience. Some people who are members of a church don't attend regularly, or they attend but don't help out. Other people don't become members at all. I really don't understand this. No, there is no one verse that says, "You must officially join the local church." But it is presupposed everywhere in the New Testament. God gave the church leaders to help hold people accountable, to teach them the Bible and make sure that they're living according to it. And one of the ways we can hold people accountable is through membership. Members of a church can be excommunicated if they are unwilling to repent. But we can't do this without some sense of membership. People who don't become

members of a church are basically saying that they will not come under the authority of that church.

But God has instituted authority everywhere: in civil government, in the workplace, in the home, and in the church. Authorities are good for us. The Bible does teach that wives should submit to their husbands. And it teaches that children should submit to parents, and employees to employers, and people in church to their leaders, and citizens of a country to their governmental leaders, and everyone to God. To serve God means to come under his authority, which means coming under God's appointed authority structure, even within the church.

Coming under authority helps remind us that life is not about us. Service reminds us of that, too. Some people who are Christians seem to act as if life revolves around them and their needs. But if we serve God, we'll become less selfish. We'll be concerned with the welfare of the church. We'll be concerned that only a few people do most of the work, and we'll want to help our brothers and sisters. We'll be concerned about those who don't yet know Jesus and we'll help reach them, individually or as a church.

People often make New Year's resolutions. Why not resolve to serve in the church? Why not resolve to join the church? I would love to talk with you if you are not yet a member. I would love to talk to members about how to serve more. Some of you have been asked or will be asked to join the church or to serve. Please think about it and pray, and then respond.

And if you're not yet truly a Christian, I would urge you to turn to Jesus. Maybe you need to learn more about him. Please come and talk to me. I would love to answer any questions you might have. Perhaps you've heard a lot about Jesus but haven't committed to him. Now is the time to follow him.