

3. Jesus Challenges the Gender Dynamic

Objectives

- Reflect on the role of women during Jesus' ministry
- Prepare participants to engage in meaningful discussion with other training participants, staff and community members on how key scriptural passages relate to gender
- Examine implications of Jesus' encounters with culture and tradition in the New Testament through a gender lens
- Explore key stories from the New Testament through role-plays

(Estimated Session Time: 2 hours and 10 minutes)

Session Flow and Description

Introduction - 15 minutes

- Share objectives for the session.
- Ask participants to share one of Jesus' encounters (with either a man or a woman) that has influenced or affected their faith.

Plenary Group Presentation - 20 minutes

Handout 2.3a, The Context of Women in New Testament Times

Include:

- Exclusion from public life
- Separation of genders

- Marriage dynamics
- Roles and responsibilities
- Worship restrictions

Discussion Question

- Which of these constraints or attitudes still affect women in your country or region?
- Describe their impact.

Dramatisation Preparation - 15 minutes

Activity 2.3a, Dramatisation: Jesus and the Samaritan Woman, and Activity 2.3b, Dramatisation: Jesus, Mary and Martha

Group Instructions

Ask groups to prepare a role-play of the encounter.

- Give group #1 the background information and Scripture text for Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman.
- Give Group #2 the background information and Scripture text for Jesus' encounter with Mary and Martha.
- If the two groups are too large, divide participants into four groups and allow more than one group to present each story.
- The groups will need to include a narrator to present the background context for the audience before the role-play begins.
- The groups will need to assign a discussion leader to draw out implications for gender equality and insights into Jesus' life and ministry after the role-play. This discussion leader can review the implications on the handout and ensure that all implications are covered.

Role-Play Presentations - 20 minutes

Plenary: Jesus' Encounters with Women and Their Implications - 15 minutes

Discussion Questions

- Think about a time when you actively or mistakenly blocked someone's future possibility or potential (either gender). What were the underlying reasons?
- In the world's eyes, what were the implications for Jesus' own life regarding his encounters with women and the marginalised in his society?

Dramatisation: Group Dynamics in Jesus' Life - 20 minutes

- Read Mark 7:1-13 to the plenary group. Who are the "players" in this story?
- List them on a flip chart as they are identified.
- Divide the group in half, and designate one individual in each group to be the "director". All members of each group should take a role in the story.
- Have each group create a two- to three-minute skit in which the dynamics and story of this passage are acted out. They may want to include extra dialogue, for example, Pharisees whispering in the background to illustrate what the Pharisees were thinking about Jesus. Jesus' words should not be altered.

Plenary Group Presentation - 20 minutes

Ask the two groups to share their skits.

Discussion Questions

- Describe the experience of playing the role of a Pharisee both before and after Jesus spoke.
- How did it feel to speak Jesus' lines?
- What does this passage say to us today about the original intent of God's law and the temptation to misuse God's law to enforce or expand personal power at others' expense?

Post-Session Assignment - Becoming a Gender Equity Witness - 5 minutes

- Track your own gender encounters for a few days.
- At the end of each day, reflect on which encounters possessed transformative potential and why.

Materials

Handouts and Activities

- Handout 2.3a, The Context of Women in New Testament Times
- Activity 2.3a, Dramatisation: Jesus and the Samaritan Woman
- Activity 2.3b, Dramatisation: Jesus, Mary and Martha

Facilitator Preparation

- Create a presentation based on Handout 2.3a.
- Makes copies of Handout 2.3a and Activities 2.3a and 2.3b for participants.
- Study Mark 7:1-13. You may be called upon to help the small groups with ideas as they prepare.
- Ensure that a flip chart is available to you for this session.
- Prepare copies of discussion questions and assignments for small group work.

The Context of Women in New Testament Times

To understand Jesus' treatment of women and how he challenged cultural norms, it is helpful to understand the context of his day. Donald Kraybill describes what he calls "the female box" Hebrew women were put into:

Women were excluded from public life. When walking outside the house, they covered themselves with two veils to conceal their identity.... A woman could be divorced for talking to a man on the street. Women were to stay inside. Public life belonged to men.

Young girls were engaged around twelve years of age and married a year later. A father could sell his daughter into slavery or force her to marry anyone of his choice before she was twelve. After this age she couldn't be married against her will. The father of the bride received a considerable gift of money from his new son-in-law. Because of this, daughters were considered a source of

cheap labour and profit.

In the house, the woman was confined to domestic chores. She was virtually a slave to her husband, washing his face, hands, and feet. Considered the same as a Gentile slave, a wife was obligated to obey her husband as she would a master. If death threatened, the husband's life must be saved first. Under Jewish law, the husband alone had the right to divorce.

The wife's most important function was making male babies. The absence of children was considered divine punishment. There was joy in the home at the birth of a boy. Sorrow greeted a baby girl. A daily prayer repeated by men intoned, "Blessed be God that hath not made me a woman." A woman was subject to most of the taboos in the Torah. Girls could not study the Holy Law - the Torah. Women couldn't approach the Holy of Holies in the temple. They couldn't go beyond a special outer court designated for women. During their monthly purification from menstruation they were excluded from even the outer court.

Women were forbidden to teach. They couldn't pronounce the benediction after a meal. They couldn't serve as witnesses in court, for they were generally considered liars.

Culture is the mechanism we develop to cope with the world around us. When culture develops outside God's rule, it reflects man's sinfulness more than the intentions of God's creation. As Kraybill noted:

“... Jesus knowingly overturns social custom when he allows women to follow him in public. His treatment of women implies he views them as equal with men before God. The prominence of women in the Gospels as well as Jesus' interaction with them confirms his irreverence for sexual boxes. He doesn't hesitate to violate social norms to elevate women to a new dignity and a higher status.”

Jesus related to women and treated them as equals and restored their dignity. In John 4:1-42, he accepted a drink from a Samaritan woman. Elsewhere, a woman with an issue of blood touched him. He welcomed this woman, contrary to ancient laws dictating her touch to be unclean (Matt. 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:40-56).

Women were accepted into the ranks of discipleship, often travelling with Jesus and supporting him financially (Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:1-3).

In Galatians 3:26-28, Paul's manifesto stresses equality among people: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, **there is no longer male or female**; for **all of you are one** in Christ Jesus [emphasis added]."

Dramatisation: Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

Group Instructions

- Ask one person to be the narrator and read the background for your audience before the skit begins.
- Ask another group member to lead a discussion at the end of the skit to elicit implications for gender equity from the story. This discussion leader will listen to what the group says and read additional implications of this story listed on this handout if not already mentioned by the group.
- Now, work together to prepare a dramatisation of this story. Everyone should take a role. Remember that there were neighbours, onlookers and community members in this story as the Samaritan woman returns to her village.
- Think about how they would have responded and what they would have said.
- Do not change words spoken by Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

Background

Women usually drew water at the end of the day, rather than in the heat of midday, as this woman did (verse 6 says it's the "sixth hour"). Biblical scholars have pointed out the hour she chose to draw water, suggesting that perhaps the woman was trying to avoid other women, who would have ostracised her because of her five husbands (verse 18). She was also a Samaritan, whom Jews considered half-breeds. She was an outcast, a morally suspicious woman from a despised ethnic group, and it was socially unacceptable for Jesus to speak with her. In fact, Jewish religious leaders would rarely speak with any woman in public. Yet she is the first person to whom Jesus reveals his identity as the Messiah.

Story



John 4:7-10, 25-30: 7A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (his disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 9The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water...25The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." 26Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you." 27Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" 28Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 29"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" 30They left the city and were on their way to him.

Implications of this story

Jesus' values radically differed from those of his day, when women were considered to be second-class and inferior in the best of circumstances. Jesus saw this woman as valuable and significant. After conversing with her, he tells her he is the Messiah. This reflects the pattern of his Incarnation, turning existing powers and structures of the time upside down.¹²

Jesus was not born to a high-class family. He was born to a poor peasant girl and her fiancé, who though skilled in woodworking was forced to flee with her and the baby as refugees in the early years of Jesus' childhood. Later, in his ministry years, Jesus did not focus on rich and important members of society. Instead, he associated with outcasts: tax collectors, prostitutes and other "sinners." He has harsh words for Pharisees and religious leaders who use their power to unjustly burden the people they are supposed to serve and lead. Jesus continually broke social norms by paying attention to those on the margins of society.

Clearly, women did not have a very high status in this culture. Jesus is making a statement not only about gender, but also about race and justice. He crosses the boundaries of gender, racial and economic distinctions and shows that all people are worthy of dignity and respect.

¹² Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1990).

Dramatisation: Jesus, Mary and Martha

Group Instructions

- Ask one person to be the narrator and read the background for your audience before the skit begins.
- Ask another group member to lead a discussion at the end of the skit to elicit implications for gender equity from the story. This discussion leader will listen to what the group says and read any additional implications of this story listed on this handout if not already mentioned by the group.
- Now, work together to prepare a dramatisation of this story. Everyone should take a role. Remember that there may have been neighbours, onlookers and community members entering the house to see and speak with Jesus. Perhaps that is why Martha was so busy and stressed in the kitchen.
- Think about how different people would have responded and what they would have said.
- Do not change words spoken by Jesus, Mary and Martha.

Background

In the time and culture in which Jesus lived, only men were instructed about God and theology. Just as Jesus took time to discuss spiritual matters with the Samaritan woman, so he also took time to talk to Mary (and to Martha, to the degree she took time to listen...).

Story

Luke 10:38-42: Now as they [Jesus and his disciples] went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Implications of this story: Jesus challenges prescribed roles.

The culture in which this story takes place is one that required women to serve men who lived in and visited their homes. Martha was busy with all the duties she was struggling to fulfil. She was doing what was expected of her as a woman. Mary, on the other hand, was doing what was forbidden to her as a woman. She was sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to his teachings. Jesus did not rebuke Mary for this, but instead commended her, saying that she had chosen "what is better". Mary's choice is radically different from the typical role prescribed for Jewish women at that time. Jesus' response was radically different from the typical male response to her choice at that time.

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