



# Raise Your Voice

*'If she have the necessary gifts and feels herself called by the Spirit to preach, there is not a single word in the whole Book of God to restrain her, but many, very many, to urge and encourage her.'*

**Catherine Booth**



**GOD'S DESIGN FOR  
GENDER EQUITY**

A Bible study from creation to Jesus, and beyond.

## Chapter 4



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## What Was Jesus Doing When He Talked to Women? Rethinking Mary and Martha

by Captain Faye Molan



*'I am no longer  
accepting the things  
I cannot change.  
I am changing the  
things I cannot accept.'*

Angela Davis

### Let's start

Imagine a high-profile celebrity arrives, unannounced, on your doorstep needing to stay overnight. Now, consider having to feed your guest (and their travel buddies) without the convenience of ready-made meals, Uber-Eats, or an extra pair of hands. It's perfectly okay if you feel overwhelmed and slightly put out by this scenario!

Seemingly normal family tensions in this story force us to look beyond our personal biases and towards God's perspective.

This is not a story about 'doing' vs 'being', or 'practical' vs 'contemplative'. It's a story that challenges gender roles and opens up the world of discipleship to women. It's a story about how to be in right relationship with God and with each other.

### Let's read

*Luke 10:38-42*

*While Jesus and his disciples were travelling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest.*

*She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message.*

*By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So, Martha came to him and said, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me.'*

*The Lord answered, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.'*

*'One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her.'*

## Let's discuss

Born into a culture and era where gender-specific roles defined your relationships and place in society, we're introduced to Martha and Mary of Bethany: sisters engaged in a moment of tension. Jesus is called in to referee.

Imagine you are Jesus. How would you reply to these Martha's queries?

- 'Hey Jesus, my sister Mary isn't helping me in the kitchen, where she belongs. Can you tell her to help me?'
- 'Hey Jesus, my unmarried sister Mary is sitting in a public space among adult males. What should we do about that?'
- 'Hey Jesus, my uneducated sister Mary thinks of herself as one of your students. What do you think about that?'

We often think of Mary and Martha as being about 'being' vs 'doing'. But in order to read it that way, we need to explain away Jesus' gentle critique of Martha. What is Jesus actually challenging in this story?

## Let's dig deeper

As we meet Martha in this story, she's annoyed—but not at Jesus. He is, after all, a close family friend, with an open invitation to enjoy her hospitality whenever he was in town.

Martha's irritation is directed at her sister, Mary of Bethany, who is disregarding the required expectations for a Jewish woman. Fuelled by her frustration, Martha interrupts Jesus' private teaching session to essentially ask him, 'Jesus, are you okay with this?'

Martha wanted Jesus to acknowledge how unfair it was that she was doing

'everything' for their visitors while Mary did next to 'nothing.' But, there is a deeper implication here: she is angry that Mary has discarded the women's domain and is assuming a position in the male sphere.

This isn't right! It goes against everything—spoken and unspoken—expected from their culture.

Biblical scholar N.T. Wright makes this helpful observation:

*...obvious to any first-century reader, and to many readers in Turkey, the Middle East and many other parts of the world to this day would be the fact that Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet within the male part of the house rather than being kept in the back rooms with the other women. This, I am pretty sure, is what really bothered Martha; no doubt she was cross at being left to do all the work, but the real problem behind that was that Mary had cut clean across one of the most basic social conventions. It is as though, in today's world, you were to invite me to stay in your house and, when it came to bedtime, I were to put up a camp bed in your bedroom. We have our own clear but unstated rules about whose space is which; so did they. And Mary has just flouted them. And Jesus declares that she is right to do so.<sup>29</sup>*

Quite simply, Jesus says, 'My sweet Martha, yes, I am okay with this.' Martha failed to notice Jesus exercising true fairness by creating an opportunity for both sisters to sit with, listen to and learn from him, as equals with their spiritual brothers.

## Reflections on Wairaka and my own whakapapa

This reminds me of a story from Māoritanga ... Imagine you're anchored slightly offshore in a dinghy with your mates. Sensing that something isn't quite right, you realise the mooring line has come undone and now you're drifting dangerously seaward. Instinct tells you to row toward the safety of the shoreline—but do you?

Wairaka—a Māori chieftainess and my Ngāti Awa ancestor—did exactly that, famously declaring as they paddled: “*Kia Whakatane au i ahau*”—*I will act the part of a man*”.

They survived. Wairaka knew that certain actions (like paddling waka) were reserved for tane (men). However, she understood that the preservation of life superseded cultural boundaries.

### **What do you think of when you remember your grandma?**

My nan (Mum’s mum) had a sexist puppy. Or maybe it just didn’t like my husband, as it would bark at my husband Steve whenever we stopped by. Nan towed an oxygen tank behind her to provide relief from the effects of emphysema. It rained at her tangi—the Nga Puhi whenua was soggy and so, too, were our grief-filled hearts.

Nanny (Dad’s mum) was an influential Māori leader in the establishment of Kohanga Reo and staunch advocate for education. She passed away in Wellington while attending a Waitangi Tribunal hearing for our Ngāti Awa uri.

Māori tikanga may appear sexist. This is not so. A mutuality of honour exists between wahine and tane. Yes, some roles are reserved for women and others for men. However, these are in line with protecting lineage and heritage, not capacity or stereotyping.

Neither gender is ‘locked’ into specific roles if it risks damaging relationships. For example, a koroua did the karanga at Nan’s tangi up north as he was the only person there at the time. And, in the Bay of Plenty, both women and men cater and care for our manuhiri at our Tu Teao Marae.

Similarly, in the story of Mary and Martha, Jesus wasn’t dishonouring cultural norms, but emphasised the importance of relationship over rules and regulations.

We all exist within culture, and God always works within and honours culture. Yet, the karanga (call) of Jesus is always towards justice and equality for his children.

### **The art of Jewish hospitality**

To fully understand the story of Mary and Martha, we need to understand *hakhnasat orchim*—the art of Jewish hospitality.

Literally meaning ‘welcoming guests’, *hakhnasat orchim* is a central commandment in Jewish culture. It’s ‘considered a higher mitzvah [commandment] than prayer,’ writes Rabbi Ethan Adler, in ‘The Importance of Welcoming Guests.’ ‘It stands on the same level as welcoming the Shechinah, God’s presence, into our homes.’<sup>30</sup>

The main tenant of *hakhnasat orchim* is being a good host. But, in our story, we see Martha carried away with busyness. I understand where Martha was coming from. Siblings aren’t always quick to follow our orders, and Mary is no exception. But no one likes getting told off—especially us first-borns. Unfortunately, telling-tales about her sister to Jesus results in Martha being corrected in front of a captive audience. Ouch!

Again, this story reminds me of my own whānau. My dad, Wayne Moses, would often say, ‘You are the head not the tail’. Sounds weird, right? He was quoting Deuteronomy 28:13, when another Moses reminds the Israelite nation that God’s blessing upon them would be reflected by their obedience to God.

Dad wanted me to be secure in my identity—and I am. There is no hierarchical order or separation between my faith, ethnicity, gender, spiritual giftings, or ministry.

Our confidence in Jesus will influence how we react to the world we live in.

Mary sits. Martha complains. Jesus corrects. Mary stays seated.

Martha is unaware that not by lingering longer with Jesus, she may have actually been a neglectful host.

Jesus gently questions Martha's priorities. Had she known Jesus was starting his farewell tour before going to the cross, Martha may have been more focused on being present with Jesus, and satisfying both her and her guests' real appetite.

Society presents busyness as preferable. In Luke 10:38–42, however, Jesus challenges this idea, noting instead that Martha is 'worried and distracted by many things.' He then goes further and defends Mary's decision to choose the 'one thing necessary.'

Perhaps, we could learn how to become better hosts to Jesus, welcoming in the presence of God.

But the climax of this story is not that Martha was 'put in her place'. Nor is the story about busyness. It's about who Jesus welcomes into his presence.

### **In the presence of Jesus**

Have you heard the term 'androcentric'? It's 'the practice, conscious or otherwise, of placing a masculine point of view at the centre of one's world view, culture, and history', and by default marginalising feminine characteristics.

Even today, we live in an androcentric world. You would be correct in assuming that androcentrism is not a biblical principle. Yet, sadly, androcentric beliefs and practices have infiltrated many parts of our society, including the Christian church—even our beloved Army.

God's high regard for his creation includes women—an outlook woven throughout the biblical narrative. The gospels alone are filled with frequent retellings of Jesus' honourable interactions with women.

Jesus was not just a nice guy being nice to women. He was challenging gender inequity. He was usurping power structures that put men in the centre, and was making space for women as equal disciples.

Jewish women were primarily encouraged to bear, rear, and care for her household. Yet, Mary—a single woman—was publicly occupying a culturally-considered male domain.

Jesus affirmed Mary's right to sit at his feet, which N.T. Wright explains is significant:

*...to sit at the teacher's feet is a way of saying you are being a student, picking up the teacher's wisdom and learning; and in that very practical world you wouldn't do this just for the sake of informing your own mind and heart, but in order to be a teacher, a rabbi, yourself... That, no doubt, is part at least of the reason why we find so many women in positions of leadership, initiative and responsibility in the early church.*

On three separate occasions Mary is found at Jesus' feet: in Luke 10:38 to learn, John 11:32 to grieve and John 12:3 to anoint him. She trusted Jesus would not shame, harm or dismiss her.

Here, Jesus affirms his acceptance of Mary as a trainee teacher, inviting her to take up space in the male domain. And in his gentle rebuke, he extended the invitation for Martha to also take her place at his feet.

Jesus helps us unlearn cultural norms that diminish us. And Mary teaches us to be Christ-centric, despite the cost to our personal comfort. Perhaps we could imitate Mary's example—her sole (and soul) attention was Jesus.

### **Here are some practical ways we can allow the story of Mary and Martha to change us:**

- address ingrained gender stereotypes, being aware of 'hidden' androcentric influences in our Army contexts

- lay aside certain cultural practices for the benefit of building equitable relationships for both women and men
- create space for women to sit with God without prejudice or pressure to perform
- promote Jesus' equitable treatment of women
- respond with Jesus-compassion when someone holds a differing opinion to ours
- encourage each other to be secure in our gender and cultural identities
- give opportunities for modern-day Mary to participate in all spheres of life and leadership without threat or regret
- advocate for justice on behalf of vulnerable women—whose voices are silenced, drowned out or misheard, especially in areas of education, access to services, opportunities for employment, and non-domestic pursuits.

As *Proverbs 31:8–9* says:

*Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable. Speak out in order to judge with righteousness and to defend the needy and the poor.*

## Let's discuss

- How does our identity, understanding of people and Mary's character mould our response to gender inequity?
- Imagine being Martha in this story... how would you feel being corrected by Jesus? How might he challenge your perspective?
- How is Jesus creating space for women in this story?

- Who are the 'Marys' in our own culture? How are we making space for them?
- How does your own heritage or whakapapa shape your ideas about gender roles or equity?
- How can this story influence our own perceptions of gender roles?
- What are some ways the church or wider culture can be andocentric?
- What is a Christ-centred response to an andocentric worldview?

## Final thought

Imagine a society where each of our members expected, experienced, and exhibited fair and equal treatment, regardless of their gender. In a world saturated with injustice, prejudice, and assumptions, Jesus calls us to love and live differently.

Equity is not aspirational; it's a prerequisite for kingdom living—Jesus shows us how it's done. Equality does not mean that to raise someone up I must lower myself. What if we were to look at every person as if they were Jesus-in-flesh, would it illicit a different response from us?

We're created for community and families are one expression of this. God's original design for families is that 'all its members (women, men, girls and boys) feel safe and connected to one another.' This is yet to be fully realised. Some of our siblings—related by birth, spiritual whakapapa or otherwise—are still thought of, referred to, or classed as 'less than.'

Were we to ask, 'Jesus, are you okay with this?' we may not like his reply.