



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 7



Chapter 7

Clothed and Confident: Our Hope Today

by **Ingrid Barratt and Captain Missy Ditchburn**

‘The dignity with which Christ treated women in the Gospels is fiercely beautiful and it was not conditional upon their understanding their place.’

Beth Moore

CONTENT NOTE: This chapter deals with sexual abuse, please take care as you read this.

Let’s start

The wonderful Mary of Bethany makes another pivotal appearance in the story of Jesus. We have seen her before, as she dared to enter the male space and take her place as a disciple of Jesus and trainee-teacher.

Now, days before Jesus prepares to go to the cross, she again braves the male domain, with a prophetic act that shows her devotion and gratitude.

At least, this is the version we read in John. The story of ‘the woman who anoints Jesus with oil’ is so significant it appears in all four gospels (the accounts that tell of the life of Jesus). Each version has variations and emphasises different themes—and Luke’s version appears to be different all together.

People have debated for centuries about whether the gospels are telling different versions of one story, or whether there are actually two or three separate women who anointed Jesus. What we do know is that in each gospel, the author emphasises different themes. So, perhaps the deeper question here is: what is the meaning behind each of these versions? What are the authors trying to say? We’ve chosen three excerpts, covering the main themes.

Let’s read

John 12:1–8

Six days before Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, home of Lazarus ... then Mary took an extraordinary amount, almost three-quarters of a pound, of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She anointed Jesus’ feet with it, then wiped his feet dry with her hair. The house was filled with the



aroma of the perfume. Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), complained, ‘This perfume was worth a year’s wages! Why wasn’t it sold and the money given to the poor?’ (He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would take what was in it.)

Then Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. This perfume was to be used in preparation for my burial, and this is how she has used it.’

Mark 14:1-9 | Key verse: 3

During dinner, a woman came in with a vase made of alabaster and containing very expensive perfume of pure nard. She broke open the vase and poured the perfume on his head.

Luke 7:36-47 | Key verses: 36-38, 44-47

One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to eat with him. After he entered the Pharisee’s home, he took his place at the table. Meanwhile, a woman from the city, a sinner, discovered that Jesus was dining in the Pharisee’s house. She brought perfumed oil in a vase made of alabaster. Standing behind him at his feet and crying, she began to wet his feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured the oil on them. When the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw what was happening, he said to himself, *If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. He would know that she is a sinner...*

Jesus turned to the woman and said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? When I entered your home, you didn’t give me water for my feet, but she wet my feet with tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn’t greet me with a kiss, but she hasn’t stopped kissing my feet since I came in. You didn’t anoint my head with oil, but she has poured perfumed oil on my feet. This is why I tell you that her many sins have been forgiven; so she has shown great love. The one who is forgiven little loves little.’

Let’s discuss:

If you want to, fill out this table and compare the three accounts:

	John 12:1-8	Mark 14:1-9	Luke 7:36-47
Where did it happen?			
Who was the woman?			
What happened?			
How did the others respond?			
How did Jesus respond?			
What happens next?			

- What do you think the different themes might be that the authors are trying to convey?
- What are the striking differences between the woman in this story, and the men?

Let's dig deeper

Women as prophets and priests

John's story is the only one to name the woman as Mary of Bethany. The timing is full of prophetic significance: we have just seen a grief-struck Mary run to Jesus, after her brother Lazarus dies. We have seen how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead—foreshadowing his own death and resurrection. And we have seen how Martha proclaimed: 'I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son' (John 11:27)—another woman, bearing witness to Jesus as Christ.

It is now Passover, just days until Jesus would be put to death. Mary once again bursts onto the scene. Again, she flouts social rules as the only woman in a room full of men. She greets Jesus with reckless emotion; with extravagant devotion. 'In a culture in which a woman's touch was often forbidden, Mary dares to cradle the feet of Jesus in her hands... Later Jesus would imitate Mary by washing the feet of the Twelve, telling them to do the same,' writes Rachel Held Evans.⁵³

And there is an even deeper meaning, which Jesus immediately recognises: Mary is the prophet who announces Jesus' coming death and burial. As always, Jesus sees her for who she really is: a teacher, a prophet, a disciple.

Mary anoints Jesus' feet. But in Mark's version, an unnamed woman anoints Jesus' head. Throughout his gospel, Mark was focused on showing that Jesus was the Messiah, foretold by the Jewish prophets. God's chosen king was signified by the prophet anointing his head with oil. The implication here is clear: this woman is anointing Jesus as King of the Jews.

Again, it's significant that a woman is chosen as prophet and priest.

She who loves

There's something really special about this story: it speaks not just to the

mind, but to the heart. The woman anoints Jesus with perfume worth a year's wages, she weeps and washes Jesus' feet with her tears, she lets down her hair and dries his feet with it. The power of this scene is in its raw emotion, humility and vulnerability. We see a woman expressing a very feminine form of devotion.

This stands in stark contrast to Judas, who begrudges the woman's generosity. And to Simon the Pharisee, whose disdain for her permeates through the story. But Jesus sees the men for what they are: thinly veiled expressions of pride and power. To everyone's shock, he denounces the male leaders and affirms the woman's devotion, with this stunning statement: 'I tell you the truth that, wherever in the whole world the good news is announced, what she's done will also be told in memory of her' (Mark 14:9).

'The tension between women and men stands out as a vital component of the anointing stories,' says J. Lyle Story. 'The positive life-giving action by the women in these stories stand in stark contrast with the hideous, life-taking and aggressive posture of the male religious authorities who plot Jesus' death.'⁵⁴

Even today, 'feminine' qualities such as emotion and empathy are often considered less trustworthy than 'masculine' qualities like rationalism and physical strength.⁵⁵ Yet, as he so often did, Jesus turns our expectations upside down. In affirming this act of devotion, Jesus affirms feminine expression as valid, powerful, worthy and holding its own authority.

When we leave this scene, the air is thick with what would happen next: the woman's bold act becomes a prophecy on which the story of Jesus will turn. Meanwhile, days later, Judas will betray Jesus.

A woman, a sinner

Luke's telling of this story is very different to the others, introducing many new elements. But his theme is underlined as he introduces her: a woman from the city, a sinner. I wonder what sin comes to mind? For those who have been around a church context for some time, it's likely that the sin

you are thinking of is prostitution. Her acts of devotion towards Jesus have been scandalised and sexualised.

Church tradition has taught us that the letting down of hair and kissing Jesus' feet indicated a woman of 'loose' morals and sexual prowess. In fact, nowhere in the Bible does it say that the woman's sin was sexual.

In fact, a respectable unmarried woman could wear her hair down. But, more importantly, the letting down of hair was a powerful symbol of grief. The early church would not have seen this act as sexually provocative, but as expressions of grief, gratitude and petition.⁵⁶ They would have wondered: 'Why is she grieving and why does she show her grief in this way?' Or, 'what kind of act of grateful devotion is this?'⁵⁷

To add insult to injury, Pope Gregory, in 591AD, managed to conflate Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, and the 'sinner' in this story, so they became one woman who he labelled 'a prostitute'. So for centuries, the two Marys—beloved disciples of Jesus—have been wrongfully demeaned as sexually sinful.⁵⁸

The sexualising of this sin in Luke says a lot more about how we view women, than it says about the woman in this story. The tendency towards seeing women first and foremost as sexual is all around us. Every day, our feeds are filled with sexualised images of women. The #MeToo phenomenon, with over 32 million tweets, brought to light the ways women have been abused and used as sexual objects.

In 2017, the #ChurchToo movement followed. Again, thousands of women raised their voices to bring to light the sexual abuse they experienced. These are just a couple of examples, from countless tweets:

'[At youth group] I shared that I had been raped and felt shame about not being pure. [My leader] responded by asking if I had repented of my role in what happened.'

'I was 11. I went to the restroom. I was followed by the youth pastor. He grabbed my arm. I was lucky enough to fight him off and escape. I just wonder how many girls weren't so lucky.'

*'I CANNOT COUNT the number of times I've heard guys in church PUBLICLY admit to molestation, harassment, assault, etc, only to be praised for their bravery & honesty. No consequences. The church's legacy of protecting abusers is sickening.'*⁵⁹

Every one of these tweets tells a disturbing and heartbreaking story of the way the Bible has been used against women. At its extreme, the 'submission' narrative (see chapter 6) has been used to silence women in the face of abuse, rather than raise their voices in holy protest. It has viewed women as lesser, and therefore objects to be used. At the same time, it has blamed women as temptresses, while upholding the lie that men 'can't help themselves'. This diminishes both men and women.

Thank God, that is not the end of the story.

Where is our hope?

If Luke wasn't describing sexual sin, what was he trying to say? Throughout the book of Luke, he emphasises the radical inclusiveness of the kingdom of Jesus: 'he is concerned with showing how Jesus welcomed in Gentiles [non-Jews], women, the poor and the outcast ... acceptance of the marginalised is central for Luke.'⁶⁰

Here, the fact that the woman is unnamed further emphasises her complete lack of status—she is a 'nobody'. That she is described as a sinner, completes her marginalisation and powerlessness. She does not belong.

In contrast, Simon the Pharisee is named. He embodies power, status and the religious establishment. He cannot get over the woman's audacity at gate-crashing his respectable dinner party.

But instead of condemning the ‘sinful’ woman, he condemns the ‘moral’ Pharisee. He accepts her anointing, her tears and her loosened hair as pure and true acts of love. While Simon can only sit back and sneer, this woman is fully committed to her loving action, and Jesus recognises that this ‘sinner’ loves greatly.

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As Jesus prepares to make his way to the cross, he makes his mission clear: the first will be last, and the last will be first (Matthew 20:16). Women, outsiders, sinners, the nameless, the vulnerable, the untouchable—they hold a place of honour at Jesus’ banqueting table.

Lyle compares this anointing with wider themes in Jesus’ story, where he chooses to honour women: ‘In a similar way, women were the first to receive and were entrusted with the wonderful witness of the resurrection. None of the eleven disciples was the first to the tomb. These women met the criteria of apostleship, even though a woman’s witness was not accepted in the legal courts.’⁶¹

Women were welcomed at Jesus’ table, as disciples, priests and prophets. No longer naked and afraid, the women of Jesus were clothed and confident.

This is our hope. There is much work still to do, but we can change our story. If we choose to side with oppression, we will be condemned like Simon the Pharisee. But if we honour each other as equals at the table of Jesus, we have learned what it means to love greatly. Brothers and sisters, let’s raise our voices.

Let’s discuss

- Imagine that the line from Luke reads: ‘a man from the city, a sinner’. What assumption would we make if the ‘sinner’ was a male? What does this tell us about the way we view men and women?
- Can you think of ways ‘feminine’ qualities have been given different value to ‘masculine’ qualities (at work, home, church or culture)? How can this story help expand these assumptions?
- How did you feel reading the tweets from the #ChurchToo Movement? If you feel able, share any stories where your gender has impacted your experiences of church.
- As men and women, how can we ‘raise our voices’ for gender equity? How can we do better?

Final thought

Ka mua, ka muri | Walking backwards into the future.

We must know where we have been in the past, to know where we should go in the future.