

## Making Room for Women:

### Becoming a Community Where More People Matter (Lk. 10:38-42 ESV)

Chris Altrock - February 10, 2019

#### Spoken Word

*38 Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. 39 And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. 40 But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, 42 but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Lk. 10:38-42 ESV)*

#### House Place

This story is unique to Luke. The Gospel of John tells us that no amount of books could hold all the stories about Jesus (Jn. 21:25). Thus, the Gospel writers chose which stories to tell and which not to tell. Some were told by more than one Gospel author. Some are found in only one gospel. This story is one of those.

Unique stories like this are usually chosen because they help the author make a point. One of the points Luke makes is the way in which Jesus made room for people who were on the margins of society, or who had a small voice in the first century. One of those groups was women. Luke thus includes events from Jesus' life that emphasize the important role of women. That seems to be why Luke includes this story.

The Bible has a lot to say about the value of women and the role of women. We don't have time to explore all of those Scriptures and to wrestle with all of their meanings. This sermon is not a comprehensive look at all the Bible has to say on this topic. This sermon is to help us fully explore one scene in Scripture.

Let's begin by exploring where this scene takes place. We are told that Martha welcomed Jesus into her home. But it's not just her home. It's the home of

Martha, Mary and their brother Lazarus. They live in Bethany (see John 11). Their home was a favorite spot for Jesus.

It's likely that Jesus is not the only person to enter their home on this day. Some of his disciples would have entered with him. Luke tells us in v. 38 that Jesus is traveling with other people. And even though Luke doesn't mention it, it's logical to believe that some of these disciples came in with Jesus.

Here is a picture of what Jesus and his disciples might have encountered as they came in. This shows a typical Jewish home in the first century. As you entered, you came into a small courtyard where you might find animals. Even if these animals were outside during the day, they would be brought in at evening. In the courtyard, or just off the courtyard, is where the cooking was done. This was near sources of water. In a separate space, upstairs, there was a living space where people could gather to eat or to sleep.

These spaces had their own purpose. You wouldn't put the animals upstairs in the living space. You wouldn't go to sleep in the animal stalls. Each room had its own function.

Some gender expectations were reflected in the way these spaces were used. Some spaces were primarily a woman's place. Other spaces were not.

### A Woman's Place

I am reminded of a space from my own childhood. Before my parents moved into our first home, a cozy house on Hound Dog Hill in Sunspot, NM, the previous owner had created a tree house. In reality, it was a large dog house that the owner secured high in the pine trees next to the garage. It looked like a giant bird house. My brother Craig and I loved to play in that bird-dog-tree-house when we grew old enough to climb the ladder up the tree.

Early on, we had one rule for our treehouse. I'll bet you can guess what rule two young boys came up with. It had only three words: "No girls allowed." This was a place for the guys. This wasn't a place for girls like DeDe Dickson who lived across the street. No "cooties" here. No girls allowed.

And while some of us might smile at the childhood motives behind such a rule, the sad thing is that those signs continue to be placed even today. A story from Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink* illustrates.<sup>1</sup> For years in the world of classical

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink* (Little, Brown & Company, 2005), 250-254.

music a “No Girls Allowed” sign hung invisibly at orchestra auditions. The number of women who auditioned and then were hired in the top U. S. orchestras was small. No matter how talented women were, they just didn’t seem to be welcomed into the top orchestras.

Orchestras finally became aware of their invisible “No Girls Allowed” sign when they changed the way auditions were conducted. Orchestras began having musicians audition behind a screen. This meant that the judges could only judge based on musical talent. They couldn’t see the musician playing and thus couldn’t be swayed by things like gender. Once those screens began to be used in auditions, the number of women hired in top U. S. orchestras increased five-fold.

There is an invisible “No Girls Allowed” sign in the scene in Luke 10. Even in this scene, there’s a woman’s place and a man’s place. And Martha is in the woman’s place:

*40 But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.”(Lk. 10:40 ESV)*

Martha is serving--probably preparing food. She’s probably doing it in the kitchen area, which, in our diagram, would be downstairs near the courtyard. And this place was, in that culture, a woman’s place. The kitchen is where women like Martha were expected to be. Serving or preparing meals is what women were expected to do. It would be unusual to find men in the kitchen and men doing the serving or preparing.

*In other words, Martha has accepted her culture’s views about a woman’s place.* This isn’t a story simply about how busy Martha is or how contemplative Mary is. It’s a story about how Martha has accepted the restrictions placed upon her by her culture. This place is for women and this work is for women.

Now she is asking Jesus to get Mary to accept this norm as well. In demanding of Jesus, “Tell her then to help me,” Martha is attempting to use Jesus to get Mary to do what women are supposed to do, in that culture.

I don’t think there’s ill will here on Martha’s part, but consider this image--someone trying to use Jesus to get a woman to get in her place.

A couple of weeks ago I was with a group of Christian leaders outside of Nashville. We were talking about the images of God we were taught as we grew in the Christian faith. One woman shared that it was a revelation to learn later in life that God values women and has a place for women in his work in this world, because for most of her Christian life up, she'd been taught differently. People had been using God to get her to stay in her place.

Martha has accepted her culture's views about a woman's place and she's trying to use Jesus to get Mary to accept this as well.

### Another Woman's Place

But notice where Mary is and what Mary's doing. It's likely that Jesus and his disciples are in the living space, which is upstairs. This is where you would gather to eat. And what's Jesus doing while they are waiting for the food? Jesus is teaching. His disciples would be around him, taking in what he is teaching. And what is Mary doing?

*39 And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. (Lk. 10:39 ESV)*

Mary is "sitting at the Lord's feet." This phrase is not just a description of Mary's location. It is a description of Mary's occupation or vocation. "*Sitting at the feet*" is the language used in Jesus' day to describe a disciple.

Paul used this language when he was describing how he was once a disciple of a teacher named Gamaliel:

*"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. (Acts 22:3 ESV)*

To be "at the feet" of someone was to be their disciple.

And, *in Jesus' day, women were not disciples.*<sup>2</sup> They were restricted from this occupation or vocation. In early Judaism, only men could be disciples. No girls allowed.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://margmowczko.com/ben-witherington-on-jesus-and-women/>

But where is Mary? And what is Mary doing? Mary is in the space with all the men. And she is sitting “at the feet” of Jesus. Mary is taking the role of a disciple. Here’s how one scholar describes it:

“People normally sat on chairs or, at banquets, reclined on couches; but disciples sat at the feet of their teachers. Serious disciples were preparing to be teachers--a role not permitted to women. Mary’s posture and eagerness to absorb Jesus’ teaching at the expense of a more traditional womanly role (10:40) would have shocked most Jewish men.” [Craig Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary*]

*Mary has exchanged her culture’s views for Jesus’ views about a woman’s place.* Martha’s upset because Mary has crossed this boundary and is doing what women weren’t allowed to do. But Jesus applauds Mary. Jesus says, in the hearing of all present, “Mary has chosen the good portion.” The word “portion” means something shared in common with others. Mary has chosen the role of a disciple. She now shares this in common with the men--something that was not allowed. And that role, Jesus says, will not be taken from her. Not her sister Martha, not anyone, anyone, can take this role away from her.

That is Jesus tearing up the “No Girls Allowed” sign.

Mary had perhaps taken courage from other women who had done the same. Luke tells us in chapter 8 of a whole group of women participating actively in the ministry of Jesus.

We have to look at many texts in Scripture to get the full picture of women according to God. This sermon is an attempt to see what is visible in one very important text. And what is crystal clear here is this: *Jesus welcomed women in ways that far exceeded the norms of his own culture.* Jesus made room for women to fill roles that were off limits to women in his own culture.

### A Woman’s Place Today

As followers of Jesus, we desire this same thing. *We are called to welcome women in the say way Jesus did.* We are striving to do that here at Highland. We are blessed with many Mary’s, women who courageously embrace the invitation of Jesus to discipleship and all that comes with it; women who fill roles that in other

places, present and past, have been considered off limits. Here are some of those Mary's--this is not comprehensive at all.

1. Hannah, Michelle, Stephanie and Lawana are paid ministers at Highland, engaged in the leadership meetings of the church--weekly staff meetings and bi monthly staff and elder meetings, and they lead large ministries that impact men and women.
2. Working with them are other women like Rhiannon, Nicole and Amy who partner with them in these ministries.
3. Easter Extravaganza and Trunk or Treat, the two largest community events held by Highland, are spearheaded by Michelle and Stephanie. In addition, they lead the Highland Children's Ministry which provides spiritual formation for hundreds of children and families.
4. More than a dozen ministries at Highland are coordinated and resourced through the efforts of Lawana. In addition, three ongoing classes in spiritual formation are co-taught by Lawana. She's a key staff member responsible for our mission work in the Philippines and China. And, she leads multiple teams of women at Highland in ministry.
5. Hannah ministers to dozens of teenage women and to hundreds of teenage women and men as part of her work with the Highland Youth Group. Each week she leads teenagers more deeply into relationship with Jesus.
6. World Bible School, through which Highlanders share the story of Jesus, is led by Martha Simpson.
7. Macon Hall Elementary and LaRose Elementary, initiatives that impact hundreds, are led by Mendy Breeden and Donna Henderson.
8. Highland's ministry to the LeBonheur NICU is led by Marva Johnson.
9. The Children's Clothing Sale, which draws hundreds to Highland each year, is led by Kathy Kledzik.
10. Pack a Sack, which provides 120 meals to children each week at LaRose, is led by Mary Jackson and Betsy Pettus.
11. Lifeline, which provides assistance to non Highlanders, is led by Barbara Redden.
12. The Highland Market and Breakfast with Santa is led by Amy Herterr, Paula Jennings, Ainsley Spellings and Connie Kolodziej.

13. Ministries to the fatherless are led by Shawna Brigance, Kelly Cates and Cindi Pitts.
14. Ministries to women are spearheaded by women like Beverly Lattimore in the Women's Prison Ministry, Carolyn Moore in the Women of Grace Sunday School class, Martha Simpson in the Women of the Word group, 13 women who lead small groups for women, and dozens of women who volunteer in the Highland Children's Ministry and in the Highland Youth Group.

We desire to be a community where women can do just what Mary did, a community where women are welcomed as they were by Jesus.

Recently 600 young women from more than 30 churches gathered in Memphis. It was a Christian girls conference. Highland teenagers attended. Sarah Brooks spoke. Afterward, all the young women wrote Sarah a note. One caught Sarah's attention. It said this:

I love how you teach about God and the Bible. I am so blessed to be able to listen to a young woman talk about God. Normally, I listen to men who speak about God, but coming from a woman makes the experience even better.

It was fitting reminder of the way in which a woman like Sarah who has sat at the feet of Jesus can impact others in a unique way.

A new member once shared with me about his daughter. She is very devout and studying at a seminary. He was excited about coming to Highland because he felt that Highland might be the kind of church where a woman like his daughter could feel welcome, a place where women like her, who have a passion for Jesus and ministry, would be affirmed.

This text reveals that not only is salvation for all, but so are discipleship, service and ministry. In Jesus' day, that was scandalous. Jesus saves all. And Jesus sends all.

No matter who you are this morning, Jesus offers salvation to you. Come and receive it. And no matter who you are, Jesus invites you into discipleship, service and ministry. To all you who are women, we want you to hear this clearly: Jesus, and we, welcome you into discipleship, service and ministry.

Celsus was a 2nd-century critic of Christianity. He once summarized his critique of Christianity in this way:<sup>3</sup>

the church attracts only “the silly and the mean and the stupid, with women and children.” [Celsus, 2nd-century critic of Christianity]

Celsus meant this as a criticism. It is, instead, a great compliment. May it always be said of us.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/women-in-the-early-church>