

In This House We Believe...
Part 3 – Jesus the Feminist
Luke 7:36-50

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ April 7, 2024 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and when he went into the Pharisee's house he reclined to dine. ³⁷ And a woman in the city who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸ She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair, kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner." ⁴⁰ Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." ⁴¹ "A certain moneylender had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

⁴⁴ Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven loves little."

⁴⁸ Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹ But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ But he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."
(Luke 7:36-50, NRSV)



According to the World Health Organization, 30% of all women in this world who have been in a relationship have experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of their partner.¹ In our own country, nearly 1 in 7 women have been the victims of domestic violence.² 200 million women today are suffering the multiple and tragic effects of female genital cutting and mutilation.³ Human trafficking is on a steady rise around the world, and 71% of all trafficking victims worldwide are women and girls, most of them trafficked as sex slaves.⁴ In the country of Niger, 75% of girls under 18 are already married, and nearly a third of those are married before the age of 15.⁵ In Afghanistan, women are now banned from going to parks, gyms, and public bathing houses. They have been stopped from pursuing education beyond the sixth grade. Their ability to work outside of health and education is all but prohibited.⁶ I could go on.

It's in light of this that we should not be surprised to see this second line highlighted in one of today's most popular creeds: Women's rights are human rights! Amnesty International defines women's rights this way: "We are all entitled to human rights. These include the right to live free from violence and discrimination; to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; to be educated; to own property; to vote; and to earn an equal wage."⁷ I know that many of us

¹ March 25, 2024 statistic from the World Health Organization. See <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

² National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. See <https://ncadv.org/STATISTICS#:~:text=1%20in%203%20women%20and,be%20considered%20%22domestic%20violence.%22&text=1%20in%207%20women%20and,injured%20by%20an%20intimate%20partner>

³ Kristen Ostling, "Violence Against Women: 6 ways women's human rights are violated around the world", *CanWach*, November 23, 2018. See <https://canwach.ca/article/violence-against-women-6-ways-womens-human-rights-are-violated-around-world/>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Sophie Ireland, "Report: Countries with highest numbers of child marriage", *CEOWorld Magazine*, October 7, 2023. See <https://ceoworld.biz/2023/10/07/report-countries-with-highest-numbers-of-child-marriage-2023/>

⁶ Mona Chalabi, "Women in Afghanistan: From almost everywhere to almost nowhere," *UNWomen*, August 15, 2023. See <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2023/08/women-in-afghanistan-from-almost-everywhere-to-almost-nowhere#:~:text=Women%20have%20been%20banned%20from,educati on%20is%20all%20but%20prohibited>

⁷ See www.Amnesty.org

read between the lines of this creed and hear a demand for a woman's right to choose an abortion, and that certainly is a part of what many of those who display this yard sign intend. But understand that there is a lot more involved in the rights of women beyond the right to choose.

I also want to make sure you understand that there is an underlying assumption in much of our current culture that among the greatest enemies to the rights of women historically have been the Bible and the church. Comedian Ricky Gervais recently posted this on social media: "I can't believe that modern educated women don't think they deserve more say in how they treat their own bodies than the men that wrote the Bible." Even more to the point, I came across this recent post on an American online publishing platform called Medium, a site committed to sharing human stories and ideas:

The root of western patriarchy lies in the lines of the Bible. Our "all-loving God" was already sexist on the day of creation as Adam was whole while Eve was born from his ribs. The storyline moves on; Eve's sinfulness tempted the innocent Adam. The Christian God seemingly hates women. Have you ever wondered how deeply the Bible shapes our society and how the Christian religion affects women today? Maybe the role of women would have been different throughout history if the faith of Egyptians, Greeks, or even hunter-gatherers became the status quo a few thousand years ago.⁸

Here's the problem with this widely-accepted current line of thinking, which perhaps has even influenced the ways some of us think. It's not only ignorant, but ironic. Historian Tom Holland, who stopped believing the Bible when he was a young boy as he became much more captivated with the gods of the Egyptians and Greeks, ultimately had to agree, after years of research, that the human rights claims of even the most secular Westerners are not only shaped by, but depend upon, the Bible and Christianity for their basis. He writes, "That every human being possessed an equal dignity was not remotely a self-evident truth [in the ancient world]... The origins of this principle... lay not in the French Revolution, nor in the Declaration of Independence, nor in the Enlightenment, but in the Bible."⁹ In Greco-Roman thinking, men were always considered superior to women, and sex was the way to prove it. To put it bluntly, to be penetrated was to be

branded as inferior. Holland notes that in Rome, men used female slaves and prostitutes to relieve their sexual desires as casually as they would use the side of the road as a toilet.

Most scholars today, though some reluctantly, concede that the very idea of human rights, including women's rights, entered the West in Christian Europe in the late Middle Ages because it was that society which was largely informed by doctrines in the Bible that were not found anywhere else in the world. Primary among these doctrines, of course, was the claim that all humans are made in the very image of God and therefore inherently possess equal dignity and worth. In the ancient world, image of God language was reserved exclusively for royalty.

But in the very opening pages of the Bible we read that all people, women along with men, are made in the image of God. In fact, man was not complete until woman was created!¹⁰ Some might say that the Bible is suggesting man was more important because he was created first. Couldn't it also be said that woman, having been created last, was the crown jewel of creation? Neither view is right, of course. The text clearly demonstrates that it is *women and men together* that best reflect God's image. And again, this idea is not found anywhere else in the ancient world.

Then you come to Jesus. If the Gospel writers were trying to put Jesus in the best light that would make him and his message most palatable to the surrounding world, they never would have allowed Jesus' radically inclusive treatment of women to appear on nearly every page of their account. The only reason they did so was because they were recording what actually happened. And the story we just read from Luke 7 is as good as any example of this reality.

We're told by Luke that one day Jesus goes to a dinner party at the home of a Pharisee. Right off the bat we know something screwy is going on. Pharisees are mentioned six times before this in Luke, and in every instance they are highlighted as the main enemies of Jesus and his mission. Why is Jesus eating in the home of this man, especially considering that sharing a table was the single most intimate setting in ancient Jewish society. Clearly, Jesus would eat with anybody. He ate with lepers and people who hated lepers. He broke bread with racial outcasts and racists alike.¹¹ As a result, nobody could figure him out.

⁸ Eszter Brhlik, "5 Awfully Sexist Quotes from the Bible That Every Person Should Read," *Medium*, May 12, 2022. See <https://baos.pub/5-awfully-sexist-quotes-from-the-bible-that-every-person-should-read-f8c2f8e1a7cc>

⁹ Cited by Rebecca McLaughlin, *The Secular Creed* (The Gospel Coalition, 2021), 65-66.

¹⁰ Genesis 1:27 – "So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

¹¹ Commentator Fred Craddock notes, "For Jesus to eat with tax collectors and sinners and refuse table fellowship with Pharisees would have made

Suddenly in walks this woman. And that's how others would have referred to her – *this woman*. Simon is mentioned by name three times in the text, and four times we are reminded he is a Pharisee. By contrast, we are never even told her name. She is only referred to as “a sinner.” And the text doesn't deny that she is a person of low morality. Even Jesus admits she is a person with “many sins.” Understand that almost nobody in Jewish society would have been considered to have had a lower status than a woman with a reputation like this. And yet for some reason she has the confidence – the audacity! – to come into this gathering of people who would have outrightly condemned her, and do so with remarkable determination to get as close to Jesus as possible. Verses 37-38 contain no less than eight verbal assertions of her determination: she *learned* where Jesus was, then she *brought*, she *stood*, she *washed*, she *wiped*, she *kissed*, she *anointed*.¹² The only possible way to explain a woman like this coming to Jesus with such assurance that she will be accepted by him, is that she had been watching him long enough to know that women, even women like her, would not be turned away.

Again, the evidence for this is dripping from the pages of the Gospels. Not coincidentally, in the very next passage, in Luke 8, we read that there were many women included among Jesus followers, women like Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Susanna, who not only helped fund Jesus' ministry, but traveled with him and the other disciples.¹³ There is no other recorded instance in history of any other Jewish rabbi allowing women to travel with him like this.

The longest recorded conversation Jesus ever had with anybody was with not only a woman, but a hated Samaritan woman of ill-repute.¹⁴

When Jesus teaches his disciples about sexual ethics, he goes as far as to not only forbid adultery, but even forbid lusting after a woman in your heart, making clear that no human being made in the image of God is to be treated as an object for selfish consumption.¹⁵

He once allowed a woman suffering from chronic menstrual bleeding, a condition that would have made her literally untouchable in that society, to touch him.¹⁶

He designs it so that it is women, though they were widely considered so unreliable and unimportant in those days that they were not even allowed to testify in court, to be the very first witnesses to his resurrection, and the very first ones to share the news with the world. In fact, women were the only group of followers to witness all four essential components of the passion – the death, burial, empty tomb and resurrection of Jesus.¹⁷

In general, the women in the Gospels tend to come out looking much better than the men. I could go on.

The early church, taking it's cues from Jesus, continued to treat women in ways that ran absolutely counter to every society around them. The Apostle Paul is often criticized in our day as anti-woman. This is a completely unfair, even uneducated, reading of his letters. Rightly read and understood, not from 21st century Western standards, but in the 1st century context where he lived and wrote, Paul is perhaps the most radical feminist of his time. Nobody else was saying the things he was saying to dignify and honor women in Christ.

Famously in Galatians 3:28 he wrote, “**There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.**” He's not suggesting that gender disappears in God's kingdom. It certainly doesn't. What he saying is that in Christ we finally see God's original intention, that all human beings, regardless of gender, ethnicity, economic status, whatever, are equally beautiful and precious in God's sight. Show me somebody besides Paul in the ancient world who was making this claim. Even when he speaks about men in roles of leadership, as he often does, it's only and always leadership that is in the manner of Christ, servant-hearted, self-sacrificial, humble, and never about power, privilege or domination.¹⁸ As historian Thomas Cahill declares, in terms of the equality of women, the claims Paul makes in his letters are, “the first ones ever to be made in any of the many literatures of our planet.”¹⁹

In light of all this, it's no surprise that women flocked to Jesus, and then continued to flock to the early church. In fact, historians estimate that up to two-thirds of the Christian community during the second

him as guilty of reverse prejudice as some of us who discover in our zeal to right wrongs we develop prejudice against the prejudiced.”

Interpretation Commentary: Luke (John Knox Press, 1990), 104.

¹² James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 228.

¹³ See Luke 8:1-3

¹⁴ See John 4

¹⁵ See Matthew 5:27-30

¹⁶ See Luke 8:43-48

¹⁷ Edwards, 232.

¹⁸ See, for example, Ephesians 5:21-33

¹⁹ Thomas Cahill, *The Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World Before and After Jesus* (Anchor Books, 1999), 141. English writer, Andrew Norman Wilson, makes a similar point: “In those days, you would have been hard put to find anyone who believed in ‘sexual equality’ in the modern sense, and the person who comes closest to it is, strangely enough, Paul.”

century was made up of women. This was exactly opposite to the broader Greco-Roman world, where women only made up about one-third of the population because many women died in childbirth, and many baby girls were abandoned to die, further evidence of the way the wider society viewed women.

As a result, those outside the church mocked the church for its radical inclusion of women. The 2nd century Greek philosopher, Celsus, one of the church's harshest critics, wrote, "[Christians] show they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable, and stupid, only slaves, women, and little children." In the same era, a Christian defender named Minucius Felix wrote a fictional dialogue called *Octavius* which contained a lengthy diatribe against Christianity that he believed summed up public opinion about the church: "[The church recruits from] the dregs of the populace and credulous women with the inability natural to their sex."²⁰

I could go on, but I hope I've given you enough to make the point that the claim that the Bible and the church have been among the primary enemies of women's rights in our world could not be more historically inaccurate. In fact, the Bible and the church *have been the very source of women's rights in Western society and beyond*, whether or not contemporary proponents of those rights want to acknowledge this fact. To be fair, there are no shortage of instances where the church has grievously mistreated and even abused women down through history, and we must own our dirty laundry here. Even so, those examples have always been a severe departure from the teachings of the Bible and of Christ, and do not discount the radical impact the church has had over time when it has gotten this right. The fact that women continue to flock to the church, usually in greater numbers than men, demonstrates that they, like that woman who washed Jesus' feet that evening, have seen something in Christ that assures them that they will find radical acceptance and favor in his presence.

One of the obvious, though rarely acknowledged, problems with any secular defense of human rights that denies the biblical source and foundation of those rights, is that they are left then to depend on evolutionary biology as our only story of origin. And if the strong devouring the weak is really the natural way of things in our world, the way our species progresses, than what leg do you have to stand on when you advocate for women's rights? When men, who are generally and

naturally physically stronger than women, subjugate them, even abuse them, isn't that simply how the world is designed us for survival? Men dominating women is then no different than lions dominating wildebeests, the way things are meant to work. Can you see that apart from its biblical foundation, the secular claim that women's rights are human rights has no way to justify itself?

Wikipedia defines feminism this way: "Feminism is a range of socio-political movements and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes."²¹ By *that definition*, Jesus is a feminist. Right? So was Paul. The early church was a feminist movement. The Genesis creation account was the first feminist manifesto. And followers of Jesus today, by this definition, ought to be feminists in the pure sense of the word. And the very movements and ideologies of pure feminism itself, whether or not its contemporary advocates acknowledge this is the case, must credit as its original source and enduring rationale the essential doctrines of the Bible and teachings of Jesus.

Now, before I end let me say that these core beliefs, of course, ought to inform the question of abortion for us, an issue which I know is implied in the yard sign creed we are exploring. It might, in fact, be the main point of many who display it. You may be aware that pro-choice advocates today are moving away from denying that unborn babies are human beings, and instead distinguishing between a human *being* and a human *person*. The idea is that a fertilized egg inside a woman is indeed human, as opposed to being some sort of other species or object, but that for that egg to become a human *person*, it has to develop and maintain certain capacities including consciousness, self-awareness, language, moral agency, the ability to reason, and independence.²²

The problem with this line of thinking, of course, is that there are plenty of examples of human life outside the womb who have never had, or who have lost, such capacities. Newborn infants don't possess many of these capacities, including language and the ability to reason, along with other adults who through disease or injury have lost these abilities. Are such human beings no longer considered persons? Though most advocates of this thinking wouldn't go this far, it is still this thinking which have led spokespeople like Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics at Princeton, to reason that human beings lacking such capacities should be

²⁰ Cited by Michael J. Kruger, "Early Christianity Was Mocked for Welcoming Women", *The Gospel Coalition*, August 27, 2020. Read the full article at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/early-christianity-welcoming-women/>

²¹ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism>

²² "Concept of Personhood," *School of Medicine at The University of Missouri*, <https://medicine.missouri.edu/centers-institutes-labs/health-ethics/faq/personhood>

considered no different from animals. He writes, “The life of a newborn baby is of less value...than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee.”²³

The primary defense for abortion in our day is that since a fetus, though human, is not yet a person, and therefore not yet endowed with rights, it is still a part of the woman’s body, and so what happens to her body, since it belongs to her alone, cannot be dictated by any other person or government. The problem with this defense for Christians at least, is that the scriptures clearly teach that our bodies are, in fact, not our own. Paul writes in 1st Corinthians 6:19-20, **“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.”** Women, like all people, of course should have the right to say what happens to their bodies over and against what other people want to do with them. That is a basic human right, rooted in scripture. But once you come to trust and follow Jesus, from that day forward you place your whole life, including your body, in his hands to be used as he desires. And you do so because you trust that his will, rooted in perfect love, is always seeking your best interests, along with the best interests of others.

In this sense, I think we all would agree that we don’t have the right to protect our own bodies if that means that in doing so harm comes to another body. That is not the way Jesus lived, and so not the way those who follow him are to live. Following his example, we are to sacrifice our bodies for the sake of others. What this means when it comes to the question of abortion, is that we have to do our best to seek the will of God, primarily revealed to us in scripture, when it comes to determining whether or not it is a human person, and not just human life, that is present at conception. That’s the key question.

My careful study over the years has led me to believe that it is a human person, that human personhood begins at conception. In David’s prayer of confession in Psalm 51:5-6 he prays, **“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place.”** Jeremiah 1:5 declares, **“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”** And Psalm 139:13 states, **“For you formed my inward parts; you covered me in my mother’s womb.”**

When a pregnant Elizabeth came into the presence of her cousin Mary, who had just conceived the Son of God in her womb, the scriptures tell us the baby leapt in Elizabeth’s womb.²⁴ And at the end of the day, I think that if we are going to determine that at conception what is in a woman’s body is, though human, not a person with inalienable rights, then we have to conclude that it would have been Mary’s rightful decision to abort her miraculous pregnancy because those cells in her womb were still just a part of her body, and not yet the person of Jesus.

It may be foolish of me to even address the very difficult issue of abortion in such a short time, but I’m afraid some of you might think I’m skirting the issue today if I failed even to mention it. Obviously, there is so much more that could, and should, be said. To be clear, I’m not at all touching here on whether or not governments should ban or allow abortions. Those are important, difficult, and nuanced discussions which we should have, but not in this context. I also recognize that there is great pain around this issue. In a group this size, there are undoubtedly some here who have made the decision to abort a pregnancy. Wherever we come down on this issue, I hope we can agree that God’s grace is always, always sufficient.

And so even in my brief comments about this today, the main thing I want to leave you with is this challenge that we must each do a careful study of God’s Word to determine whether or not pregnancy immediate results in a person, or merely human cells with the potential for personhood. Admittedly, there is no verse or passage in the Bible that clearly and definitively declares that human personhood begins at conception. Even so, in my personal studies, everything I read in God’s Word *leans* towards suggesting that it does. If it does, that means that while women’s rights are indeed human rights, so are the rights of the unborn. If you see it differently, I would be sincerely interested in hearing what your studies of scripture have revealed to you, and promise to listen with humility as you share with me your insights. I want to get this right. I know that we all do.

In the end, let’s not lose sight of the main point I’m trying to make today, the main good news if I might be so bold. Just like we talked about a few weeks ago, that black lives matter because all human lives are made in the image of God with inherent dignity and worth, so do women’s lives. And nobody in the world has a more solid foundation to stand on when we make this claim than do followers of Jesus, the one who demonstrated this to such an extent that even the seemingly most

²³ Cited by McLaughlin, 80.

²⁴ Luke 1:41 – **“When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb.”**

unworthy women in his day felt absolute confidence that when they came into his presence they would experience nothing but acceptance and favor. As this woman wept and worshipped at his feet, so should we all.

Amen.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. When you hear the creed, “Women’s rights are human rights!”, what comes to mind? What is your first reaction?
2. Read the passage from Luke 7:36-50 again. What do you notice? Pay special attention to Jesus’ interactions with this woman.
3. This woman is incredibly bold as she come to Jesus in the midst of a very inhospitable setting. Where do you imagine such boldness comes from? What is she after?
4. Why do you think women, from the very beginning, have always been so drawn to Christ?
5. Would you call Jesus a feminist? Why or why not?
6. The claim is made that the idea of human rights in the Western world, and maybe beyond, comes from the Bible and from Christianity. Do you believe this claim? Is this how you have always understood it?
7. What are steps that you, or our congregation together, can continue to make to ensure that the God-given rights of women in our world are honored and protected?
8. In the current debate around abortion, the distinction is often made between the humanity and personhood of a fetus. How do you think that the scriptures address this distinction and inform us in this difficult matter?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



How did Jesus live his life in ways that taught us that God loves and values men and women, boys and girls, just the same?