



Jesus the Game Changer - Episode 4: Women & Children

Introduction

Though Christianity is sometimes stereotyped in the popular imagination as a patriarchal religion, this is an inaccurate reflection of both Jesus' teaching and the history of the Church. For His time, Jesus was radically inclusive of both men and women. Throughout history, the Church has been radically diverse and often a place where women have experienced greater freedom than in society as a whole. In the same way Jesus went out of his way to focus on children, giving them worth.

Watch Episode 4 'Women and Children'

Getting started

1. In what ways are women or children in contemporary society not experiencing freedom?

The life and teaching of Jesus

Read: Luke 8:1-3

Luke unfolds the story of Jesus' ministry through this Gospel narrative. He includes all sorts of interesting pieces of information such as here where he mentions three women who not only follow Jesus but also support His ministry.

First mentioned is Mary Magdalene who many have assumed is a prostitute, despite there being no evidence from Luke (or any other writers) that this was the case. We do know that several demons were cast out of her and she is indebted to Jesus. We also hear of Joanna's link to Herod's household, a position of privilege and potential influence. Finally, Susanna is mentioned; she contributes from her own resources to support Jesus.

It's instructive to note that some of these women are also mentioned at Jesus' crucifixion when all the male disciples had run away (Mark 15:40-41). They are also the first ones to find the tomb empty and announce that Jesus had risen (Luke 24:10).

2. What do these stories tell us about the significance of women in the ministry of Jesus?
3. Why is there such a high level of commitment by women to Jesus' ministry?

Read John 20:10-18

Mary Magdalene had gone to the tomb with other women to anoint the body of Jesus with spices; a custom of dealing with the dead with honour and respect. When they get there Jesus' body had disappeared. John recounts that the others ran to tell the rest of Jesus' followers what they had discovered but Mary remains in the garden.

4. What do you make of this interaction between Mary and Jesus?
5. Why is it important?
6. Does it add to, or detract from, your assessment of the believability of the story?

Read: Luke 10:38-42

As a younger person this story always bothered me. Here was Martha working away to make a meal and Mary is just sitting around. When Martha points out what she sees as an obvious injustice, Jesus sides with the 'lazy' sister. As a kid I always wondered how that was fair.

Key to this story is that Mary wasn't just sitting around! Martha had taken the traditional role for women of preparing food. Mary on the other hand was sitting at Jesus' feet, the place of learning. When Martha complains, Jesus makes the point that Mary is learning, growing in knowledge and expanding her mind. These are not only important but 'it will not be taken away from her'. Not taken by her industrious and annoyed sister, nor by a culture that believed she could not, or should not, learn.

7. If you have heard this story before what has been your reaction?
8. Consider what it tells us about Jesus' attitude to women.

Read: Matthew 18:1-6

In a society where parents must have loved children they were also seen as disposable, especially if the 'wrong' gender. It is difficult for us to imagine that unwanted children were exposed to the elements and left to die. Read this statement from John Ortberg...

"Seneca, a Roman writer of the first century, said 'we drown the infirm at birth.' That wasn't considered something to be embarrassing, or something that they would try to hide, it's just they viewed life in that way."

The attitude of the Greco-Roman world to pride, position and power is discussed in another episode but it is clear from this passage that talking about how wonderful you were was fairly usual behaviour. This seems to be the topic of the disciple's conversation (v1). In response Jesus uses a child to make His point about 'who is greatest'.

9. Why was it so significant that Jesus used a child as an example here?
10. How has Jesus' treatment of children in this story help reframe attitudes to childhood?

Game Changers

Read and discuss the following two quotes from Jo Vitale (Apologist, Oxford) regarding how women were seen in Jesus' and Paul's time in history.

"Plato basically argued that women are in every sense inferior to men. Whether that's morally, intellectually, spiritually and physically, just in every sense they're not on the same level.

Jewish men would regularly pray 'thank you God that I'm not a gentile, a slave or a woman.'"

Read: Ephesians 5:25-32

Many see the Christian Church's attitude to women as misogynistic. Passages like the one just read, especially v22-24, seem to suggest men should control women.

In this series there has been much discussion about very young women (13-16 years) marrying much older men and being treated as possessions.

11. Discuss whether the content of these verses (Ephesians 5:25-32) would have been read by the Early Church as 'misogynistic', 'normal and usual' or 'radical and revolutionary'?

In response to the discussion around women in modern society, and how the Church treats women, Jo Vitale makes this statement ...

"I've found a freedom that I don't see anywhere else in our culture. A freedom from being objectified, from being seen as just a sexual object, a freedom to become who God has called me to be in every aspect of life, and it's not about meeting cultural expectations and what society says I have to do. Actually, it's about who does God call me to be."

12. What is your response to this statement?

13. How would following Jesus release women from pressure and even exploitation within our culture?

Personal Reflection

It's clear from this episode that there is still plenty to be done to protect and value women and children and, following Jesus' teaching to abolish injustice within our society.

Christine Caine (Activist and Founder, A21) finishes this episode by saying ...

"Jesus came and rescued me and my life can be a game changer for someone else's life. It doesn't mean it has to be spectacular, it doesn't mean it has to be sensational. I truly believe if you value your life, your life can be a game changer for somebody else's, absolutely."

- How could your words or actions make a difference for someone else?'

Further Reading and Research

Bakke, O.M. *When children became people: the birth of childhood in early Christianity*. Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2005.

Mangalwadi, V. *The book that made your world: how the Bible created the soul of western civilization*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011. (see Chapter 15)

Metaxas, E. *Seven women; and the secret of their greatness*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015.

Ortberg, J. *Who is this man? The unpredictable impact of the inescapable Jesus*. Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2014. (see Chapter 4)

Stark, R. *The rise of Christianity: a sociologist reconsiders history*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996. (see Chapter 5)

Stark, R. *The triumph of Christianity: how the Jesus movement became the world's largest religion*. New York NY: Harper Collins, 2011. (see Chapter 7)