

Gender *and* Discipleship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Mark 5:25–34, Luke 1:26–38, 8:1–3, 10:38–42, John 4:4–30.*

Memory Text: “Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word’ ” (*Luke 1:38, NRSV*).

Women were, one way or another, intimately involved in Christ's ministry, even from the start. Mary, His earthly mother, gave birth to the infant Jesus. Of course, only a woman could have done that, but her example of faith and submission remains a powerful one for all who would seek to be a disciple of Jesus. Then, all through the Gospels, we can see the crucial role of women. From Mary the mother of Jesus, from the woman who touched His garment and was healed, to the woman at the well, and others, it is clear that a woman open to the prompting of God's grace could be a follower and disciple of Christ.

In an attempt to gain more insights into what it means to be a disciple, this week we will take a look at how Jesus interacted with some women.

The Week at a Glance: What incredible things was Mary, Jesus' mother, asked to accept on faith? What does the Bible say about the role of women in the ministry of Jesus? What can we learn about discipleship from the story of the woman at the well?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 2.*

“Be It Unto Me”

Read Luke 1:26–38. Try to place yourself in the position of Mary. What can we learn about her character from these verses? What very difficult things was she told to believe?

Even in an ancient society, where the concept of the supernatural was much more readily accepted than it is in many of our modernistic, scientific cultures, the angel’s words to Mary must have stretched her faith to the limits. First, she would be pregnant though still a virgin. Had that ever happened before in the history of the world? If that were not hard enough, her child would be the Son of God. Her question, “How shall this be?” was natural and normal enough. But once the angel pointed her to the miracle of her cousin Elisabeth, who conceived in old age (*Luke 1:5–25*), and then gave her the powerful reassurance, “For with God nothing shall be impossible” (*vs. 37*), Mary responded with an affirmation of faith and acceptance.

Read prayerfully and carefully her response to the angel: “Be it unto me, according to thy word” (*vs. 38*). What kind of attitude does this reveal? What kind of model of faith does Mary’s example provide for us?

After centuries of theological discussion on the question of the Incarnation (the coming of Jesus in humanity), the subject remains an incredible mystery. Imagine how much this young woman did not understand about what was happening to her. And yet, even with all she did not know, she surrendered herself in faith to the Lord and wanted His will to be done.

As with Mary, we are asked to believe in things we do not fully understand. Compare your spirit to the spirit of faith Mary represented here. How open are you to trusting God on the things you just do not understand?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Luke 10:38–42*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Examine what the lives of the women who ministered to Jesus teach us about discipleship.

Feel: Cultivate the desire to sit at His feet like Mary.

Do: Determine to hear His Word and do it.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Serving Jesus

A Mary *heard* Jesus' words. How does it imply something that goes far deeper than the ear to the heart? How is this a requirement of discipleship?

B In Jesus' day, Mary's place was not at His feet but in the kitchen. What does her posture reveal about the inclusiveness of the gospel?

C The Greek text says Martha was "drawn away" by all her serving. What is the danger for us in serving Jesus without first sitting at His feet?

II. Feel: Faith Like Mary's

A How can we still hear Jesus' words and sit at His feet like Mary?

B Jesus was right there with Martha, and yet, she was "drawn away" from Him. How can we come so close to Him but fail to dwell in His presence?

III. Do: Seek the "One Thing"

A What is the "one thing" Jesus praises Mary for having, and how do we seek it?

B Notice Martha tries to "set Jesus straight." She finds fault with Mary and blames Jesus for encouraging her. How do we sometimes make the mistake of telling God how to do His job? How should we respond instead?

▶ **Summary:** In contrast to the culture of His day, Jesus sought and valued the contributions of women.

Female Followers of Jesus

Luke 8:1–3 describes Jesus' second Galilean tour. Besides the Twelve original disciples, who else accompanied Jesus on this tour?

Luke is very explicit that women accompanied Jesus on His missionary tours. This should not be surprising, because Luke's Gospel emphasizes the salvation and the release Jesus brought to the outcasts, the women.

"Luke is the only gospel writer to record many of the details of the early life of Jesus, and often does so from the viewpoint of the women most concerned—Mary, Elisabeth, and Anna. . . . It is as if Luke were saying the gospel of the kingdom of heaven was as much for women as for men, and that their part in its proclamation was equally important."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 769, 770.

Jesus' act of allowing female disciples was unique. Various religious movements in that time did not include women. Some teachers said that women were emptyheaded, were not to be taught, should not be seen in public with men, and should be confined to the home and domestic arts. Yet, from the earliest pages of the Gospel right up to the end, women, in one way or another, were involved in the life and mission of Jesus.

Read Matthew 27:55, 56 and Mark 15:40, 41. What more do they add about the role of women in the ministry of Jesus?

Having been healed of various maladies, some of these women showed their love and devotion by assisting in His work and providing for His sustenance. Some of them might have been widows, since they were part of the missionary tour and had sustenance to provide for the needs of Jesus and His disciples. Whatever the specifics, the Word of God shows that women played an important role in the earliest days of the church.

Read Galatians 3:28. Looking beyond the immediate context, what should these words tell about how contrary to the principles of Christ prejudice is? Examine your own heart. What attitude and prejudices might you be holding that are contrary to God's Word?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Key Concept: We must spend time with Jesus and have a close relationship with Him in order to be His disciples.

Isn't it curious that in many cultures the word *touch* is used to express not only physical contact but our emotions? We may say "What you said touched me deeply" to mean we are moved. Or, "She's a bit touchy" to describe someone whose feelings are hurt easily. Companies tap into this in their advertising slogans: AT&T with their "Reach out and touch someone" campaign. And Johnson & Johnson's slogan for their baby products: "Touch their todays. Touch their tomorrows." These slogans are so effective, because of all the five senses, touch comes closest to embodying our relationships.

But touch is even more critical for our emotional well-being than one might think. Studies show that without it we would die. This truth is demonstrated palpably in the lives of the bonobo monkeys of the Congo. Baby bonobos are very delicate creatures. In the wild, they cling close to their mothers' bodies for almost five years. Orphaned monkeys need constant love and attention, or they will give up and die. Only a "substitute mother"—a human male or female—who can give this care for eight to ten hours a day can keep the bonobo from giving up the fight for its life. Back in the seventies, Dr. Harry Harlow confirmed this with his studies of rhesus monkeys: Hunger for touch is even more important for infants than hunger for food. Without touch we would die.

Consider This: This week's lesson talks about women who came into contact with Jesus—women who touched Him, talked with Him, sat at His feet, and heard His words. What does this tell us about our need to have a close relationship with Jesus? What does it mean to touch Him?

In what ways is Jesus our Substitute Parent when we are born again? What does the fate of orphaned bonobo monkeys tell us will happen to us if we deprive ourselves of His love and care for us?

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Bible Commentary

I. "Behold the Handmaiden of the Lord" (Read Luke 1:26–38 with your class.)

C O N T I N U E D 

“If I May Touch His Clothes . . .”

Read Mark 5:25–34, the famous account of the woman healed from a distressing malady. Though the story does not portray the woman as a disciple per se, she displayed the kind of faith so necessary for discipleship.

Notice the interesting contrast between how she approached Jesus and how Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, did (*Mark 5:22, 23*).

What were the differences between their approaches? At the same time, what was the one thing they apparently had in common?

As far as we can tell, this woman had not seen Jesus before. According to the text, it was when she had heard of Him that she came. Someone had witnessed to her, telling her of this Man, and she moved ahead in faith, even without seeing anything for herself. This was her first act of faith (*see also John 20:29, Heb. 11:1*).

No question; according to the texts, the woman was desperate. Levitical law deemed her unclean. People were not to come in physical contact with her. If she had been married, she would not have been allowed intimate relations with her husband; in fact, technically, she would not even have been able to touch her own children. All this for 12 years!

What was the next great act of faith on her part?

However secretly the woman sought to act, Jesus turned it into a public display. She told Him (and everyone listening) what had happened. By giving her own testimony, she did her first act as a disciple. Now that the whole event was known publicly, how much easier it would be for her to tell others about what Jesus had done for her. She had come to Jesus because she had heard about Him; she now could tell others about Him, as well.

Why must we continue to trust in the Lord even when healing, as or when we want it, does not come? If we stop trusting, what have we left?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Be glad you weren't born a woman in Jesus' day. The attitude toward women was not healthy. Perhaps a saying found in the deuterocanonical book of Ecclesiasticus says it best: "Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good" (42:14). The Mishnah remarks: "may the words of Torah be burned, than that they should be handed over to women" (Mark McFall).

Yet, for Jesus to come to this earth, this is exactly what had to happen: Jesus, the Living Word, was "handed over," in the form of an embryo that was implanted by the Holy Spirit into the body of a woman. Augustine said that Mary first conceived Christ in her heart before she conceived Him in her womb. Likewise, we must be a vessel. Just as she offered her life, body and soul—"behold, the handmaiden of the Lord"—to give birth to Jesus, we must offer our lives, body and soul, to Him to give birth to His righteous character through our lives.

But how did Mary do this? What was her secret? She was not the daughter of Herod the king, or of a high priest, but an ordinary woman. Even the meaning of her name seems to dismiss her as a likely candidate for Jesus' mom-to-be. But therein lies the marvel—and hints at hope for us. Just as her name means "rebellion, bitterness, trouble, and disobedience," we are disobedient, troubled, and rebellious. It was only her submission to the will of God through faith that conceived the Child Jesus in her, just as our submission to Him will conceive His will in our lives. It is when we submit our rebellious natures to God that He brings forth the miracle of the new birth in us—"Immanuel," God with us. We marvel at the biological miracle of the virgin birth. But is it any less of a miracle for us who are dead to experience the new birth in Christ?

Consider This: Why might God have chosen Mary? How would Jesus' life have been different if Mary had been Herod's daughter? How did this prepare Jesus for His lifework? What does Mary's submission suggest about parenting as a form of discipleship?

II. The Women Who Followed Jesus *(Read Luke 8:1–3 with your class.)*

Mary Magdalene may have taken her name from the seaside town of Magdala, which means "tower" or "castle." And if her past is any indication, it would have been a "haunted" tower or castle. And is it any wonder coming from a town like Magdala? The Talmud says it had an unsavory reputation for prostitution. It was also a town known for its dye works and had primitive textile factories. Mary may even have been

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Troubled by Many Things

In order to be a disciple, we need to know Jesus personally. We must have a close relationship with Him. This can come only by spending time with Him. In our busy lives, with so many important things vying for our time, how easy it is to get caught up in things, even good and important things, and let our relationship with God slip.

Read Luke 10:38–42. How does this episode reveal how even good things can distract us from what is most important? What message for you can be found in the story of these two female “disciples”?

Mary *heard His word*. No one can be a true disciple who does not hear His word. The text said, too, that she sat at His feet. First-century teachers sat on high stools while their students sat at their feet on lower stools or the floor. To sit at one’s feet means to adopt the posture of a disciple or learner. That she sat at Jesus’ feet meant that she was His student (*compare Acts 22:3*).

In contrast was her sister, Martha. The Greek text says that she was “drawn away” by much serving. In one sense, this could be understandable. After all, the Master had come to their house, so it was their responsibility to tend to their guests’ needs. At the same time, her plea that her sister help also echoed customary conventional values and expectations. Mary’s place was in the kitchen—the part of the household designated for women—not in the dining area with the men.

Yet, Jesus did not rebuke Mary; He chided Martha. He named her twice, perhaps showing concern. Martha’s complaints were justified, but Jesus’ rebuke reminds us there are issues more important than other necessary things. We all need to take heed, for sometimes we allow the urgent to crowd out the important or the good to exclude the vital and necessary.

How can you find the proper balance in your own life between things that must be done and spending time at the feet of Jesus? What adjustments might you need to make? At the same time, can one ever be too much like Mary and not enough like Martha? If so, how?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

a dyer. While we do not know her profession for certain, we do know that Jesus cast demons out of her not once but seven times. Seven, of course, is a number that represents completeness. And this suggests that she was *completely* Satan's or under his power before Christ made her *completely* His. What hope that should give us that no soul—even one that is sold completely over to the devil—cannot be freed by Jesus. And while her past was a dark and terrible thing, her life as a devoted follower of Christ became full of light and hope.

Mary was not the only one whose past was a dark and terrible thing. Luke tells us that there were other women—Joanna and Susanna—out of whom Jesus cast demons or healed from diseases. And in turn they supported His ministry. Think about what that entailed. As traveling evangelists on the road, Jesus and His crew incurred many expenses: water for drinking, washing, and laundry; the expense of clothing and mending. Joanna's money and efforts would have gone to these items. We know that Joanna's husband, Chuza, was Herod's chief financial officer. That was a position of some prominence. Surely, the fact that Chuza's wife was giving some of her money to support the "upstart Galilean" was not lost on Herod. Imagine the bravery that it took for Joanna, a lady of the court, to contribute to such a "disreputable" cause when the eyes of the court watched her every move.

We know even less about Susanna. Just her name, "a white lily," reminds us of Christ's words that the lilies of the field, without any effort on their own, are even more glorious than Solomon. There is a lesson there for us, as well. Any beauty, any purity we have, is Christ's, and any goodness in us is not gotten through any effort of our own. Susanna had been healed both spiritually and physically by Christ, and she revealed her gratitude by seeing to the comfort and well-being of Jesus and His other disciples.

Consider This: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna saw to Jesus' needs out of their own belongings. What precedence does this set for us today?

III. The Touch of Faith *(Read Mark 5:25–34 with your class.)*

Can't stop a hemorrhage? Carry an ostrich egg wrapped up in a linen rag in the summer and a cotton one in winter. If that doesn't work, carry a kernel of barley corn found in the dung of a white, female donkey—so says

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The Woman at the Well

Read John 4:4–30. How did Jesus go about winning the confidence of this woman and, essentially, turning her into a disciple?

The process of winning the woman of Samaria deserves the most careful study on the part of all who set out to win others to Christ.

There were four main stages in this process: (1) The awakening of a desire for something better (*vss. 7–15*); (2) The awakening of a conviction of personal need (*vss. 16–20*); (3) The call for a decision to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah (*vss. 21–26*); (4) The stimulus to action appropriate to the decision (*vss. 26–30, 39–42*).

Imagine what must have gone on in the mind of this woman. First, this stranger, a Jew, shows her unexpected kindness. The next thing she knows, He reveals to her some of her deepest and darkest secrets, something that most likely no one but she knew. Her response, “Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet” (*vs. 19*), is a confession, not only of her own sins but that Jesus is Someone special. Notice, too, that when the woman sought to change the subject, Jesus did not press her anymore with her sins. Instead, He picked up on her conversation and used it to point to more truth, ultimately leading her back to Himself, this time not as a prophet but as the Messiah. Impressed by Jesus—no doubt mostly by His knowledge of her secrets—the woman believed Him.

Look at how she witnessed to her own people (*vss. 29, 39*). What so impressed her about Jesus? Might there not have been a bit of a confession in her own witness? How effective was this witness?

The Lord changed this woman, apparently no bastion of purity and piety, into a powerful witness for Himself. What lessons can you draw from this story about (1) not judging the hearts of others and (2) forgiveness and grace even for the worst of sinners?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

the Talmud. No doubt the nameless woman who bled for 12 years had tried these remedies. No wonder she went broke, spending all her money on exotic ingredients. Unlike acne or hiccups, her disease made her a social leper. She was considered unclean. For 12 years she was shut off from the worship of God and the company of family and friends. Anything she touched was unclean, so she could touch no one. Imagine touching no one for 12 years. Until Jesus.

By touching Jesus, she would make Him unclean. That meant He would need to go to the temple and, at His expense, buy animals to sacrifice to make Himself clean again. Moreover, she was weak from losing so much blood for so long. She was too embarrassed to ask for His help. But her hands could reach for what her mouth could not ask for if He would just pass close enough to her.

Consider This: This woman came into direct contact with Jesus and was healed. What does it mean to touch Jesus as she did? Many suffer silently, too embarrassed to ask for help. How can we reach out to them?

► **STEP 3—Practice!**

Thought Questions:

When the woman touched Jesus, He felt power leave Him. What might that mean? What might this tell us about sacrifice and its role in discipleship?

Application Questions:

We've been taught to take everything we need or want to Jesus. But have you ever asked yourself, *What could I give Him?* Read this statement from *The Desire of Ages* to find out: "The Saviour is thirsting for recognition from those He has come to save." Is it for Himself or for our good that He longs for us to know Him? How can we give Him this recognition?

► **STEP 4—Apply!**

Think of the "wells" in your life where you met Jesus as did the Samaritan woman. What are some of these places, and how can you use them as opportunities to draw others to Christ?

Further Study: Read *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 607, 608, 656, 657, 669, 670, 785, 786, 940–942; Ellen G. White, “Lazarus, Come Forth,” pp. 524–536, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“The ‘one thing’ that Martha needed was a calm, devotional spirit, a deeper anxiety for knowledge concerning the future, immortal life, and the graces necessary for spiritual advancement. She needed less anxiety for the things which pass away, and more for those things which endure forever. Jesus would teach His children to seize every opportunity of gaining that knowledge which will make them wise unto salvation.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 525.

“One of the characteristics of the Gospel of Luke is its frequent references to Christ’s ministry for the womenfolk of Palestine and the ministry of some of them on His behalf. This was something new, for the role of Jewish women in public life had been a relatively minor one, although in isolated instances, prophets like Elisha had ministered to women and been ministered to by them.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 769.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Go back over the story of Mary being told about becoming Jesus’ mother. Again, think about what amazing things she was told to believe, things she could not possibly understand. Think about many of the things we Christians are told to believe that we cannot possibly understand. And though we do not understand them, we still have faith and even reasons to believe them. Bring your thoughts to class and, as a class, talk about these things and why we can and should believe them, regardless of what we do not understand. How can we help others who are struggling to believe in things that, in the end, have to be taken on faith?
- 2 At a time when, in most countries, the membership of the church seems to be predominantly female, why should the church not discourage female discipleship?
- 3 Jesus was revolutionary, transforming, liberating, innovative, restorative, sensitive, and supportive. No one was ignored, marginalized, or ostracized in His presence. Contemporary disciples should emulate Him and model His example for all classes, cultures, genders, peoples, and nations. How can you help your local church be a place where all are welcomed and can find a role in service?