

Women of Mission



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 8:41–55; John 4:1–40; Acts 16:14–16; 18:1–3, 24–28; Rom. 16:3–5.*

Memory Text: “Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.” (*Luke 7:47, NIV*).

Key Thought: Though women were often given background roles, the New Testament shows them heavily involved in advancing the mission of the church.

Women play key parts in biblical history. They include good and bad queens, righteous maids, praying mothers, powerful leaders, influential wives, generous givers, prostitutes, prophets, deaconesses, gracious hosts, and faithful supporters and friends of Jesus.

In such stories as Esther and Deborah, women take center stage. Throughout the Bible's broad canvas, we can see how women with a mission have helped advance the kingdom of heaven in many ways.

In the New Testament we see examples of how Jesus dealt with women. At the same time, many women followed Jesus and supported Him financially (*Luke 8:1–3*) and helped care for His needs (*Mark 15:41*). Jesus specifically ministered to women on several occasions. When many of His disciples deserted Jesus at His death, women remained true and stayed with Him to the cross. Women were the first witnesses of His resurrection.

This week we will look at just a few of the women in the New Testament who, although their stories may be brief, played a vital part in the mission of the church.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 6.*

Breaking the Rules

In the society in which Jesus lived and worked, women were largely kept out of public life. At Sabbath worship, they were mere onlookers, not participants. Like the Gentiles, women had a specially designated outer court at the synagogue, from which they could not stray. Significantly, it was located beneath the court for the men.

In public, men were restricted in how much they could talk to a woman, even their wives. Women were not allowed to study the Torah; in fact, they were not even allowed to touch the Scriptures, lest they contaminate them.

Jesus took a different approach. Women were His beloved children, just as much as men. His death covered them just as much as any male.

Although rabbis of the time were not permitted to teach women, Jesus happily did. On one occasion, Mary, the sister of Lazarus, sat at His feet like a pupil (*Luke 10:38–42*).

Prejudice against women entered every aspect of life. Men were allowed to divorce women, even for the most trivial offenses, but women were not allowed to divorce men, even for the most serious of offenses. Jesus had strong words to say about the current practice of divorce, which treated women as if they were objects owned by men (*Matt. 19:3–8*).

In the space of two chapters in Luke, Jesus breaks the laws regarding contact with ceremonially unclean women. He touches a dead girl and restores her to life (*Luke 8:41, 42, 49–55*); allows a hemorrhaging woman to touch Him (*Luke 8:43–48*); and lets a woman of ill repute wash His feet (*Luke 7:37–39*). Read each of those accounts. What principles do you think led Jesus to break these rules? How are those principles applicable today?

While He was on earth, Jesus broke down earthly, human barriers. As the apostle Paul said, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (*Gal. 3:28*).

What kind of prejudices are you still harboring against any group? How can you recognize those prejudices? More important, why must you overcome them?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Luke 7:47*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: The difference between cultural rules and regulations and biblically authoritative rules and regulations.

Feel: A responsibility to make sure all members of society receive the honor and respect they deserve.

Do: Devise some things the class can do to carry out the “know” and “feel” issues above.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. **Jesus Breaks the Rules** (*see for instance Luke 7:37–39*)

A Have the class make a list of ways in which Jesus “broke” cultural rules and substituted biblical principles.

B Discuss with the class some contemporary cultural rules in your society that might need to be “broken” when compared to biblical principles; for instance, the early church (*Acts 16:14–16*).

C If Lydia were alive today in your society, what position might she occupy in the church?

D If Priscilla (*Rom. 16:3–5*) came to your church as an evangelistic speaker, how might she be received?

II. **“Four Unmarried Daughters Who Prophesied”** (*Acts 9:21*)

Have the class discuss the implications of such action. What are the implications for church leadership, authority, and ministry in these few words?

► **Summary:** God’s people today need to make a clear distinction between cultural customs and biblical principles. Cultural customs are changeable; biblical principles are not. Jesus always focused on biblical principles and the mission of the church.

The Woman at the Well: Part 1

The division between Jews and Samaritans was long and bitter (*for its historical roots, see 2 Kings 17:24–41*). When the exiles returned from Babylon and attempted to rebuild Jerusalem’s temple and walls, the Samaritans tried to stop their work (*see Ezra 4:7–22 and Neh. 4:1–5*). Incidents such as this, as well as the dispute over the true site for the temple, fueled hatred between both groups. On one occasion a group of people tried to insult Jesus by calling Him demon-possessed and a Samaritan (*John 8:48*).

The most direct and quickest route between Jerusalem in the south and Galilee in the north was through Samaria. However, when making this trip, people would often take a detour around Samaria—despite the inconvenient longer distance in order to avoid their long and bitter enemies.

Look up the following passages in Luke. What do they reveal about Christ’s attitude toward Samaritans? What should this tell us about what our attitudes toward those traditionally despised by our own culture must be? *Luke 9:51–56, 10:30–37, 17:11–19.*

On more than one occasion the Gospel writers show Jesus traveling directly through Samaria. One time on His way from Judea to Galilee, He stopped at the Samaritan town of Sychar—the site of Jacob’s well and near Mount Gerizim, the holy place for the Samaritans, the site of their temple. It was here that He had His famous exchange, not just with a Samaritan but a Samaritan woman (*see John 4*).

Much to the woman’s surprise, He asks her if she would draw water for Him to drink. The request shocks her, because Jesus was a Jew and she was a Samaritan and a woman!

As Jesus speaks to this woman, He breaks several cultural taboos. The apostle John says that when he and the other disciples returned, they “were surprised to find him talking with a woman” (*John 4:27, NIV*). It was not considered appropriate for a man, even a religious teacher, to be seen talking to a woman in public—especially, of all people, a Samaritan woman.

Jesus did not let social custom interfere with His mission. How do you find the right balance between not giving social offense and doing what is right?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Peter, Daniel, David, Isaiah, Moses, and Paul. The Bible is replete with the stories of men who have done great things for God and with God, and there's no doubt about that.

However, it would be dishonest—even foolish—to minimize the role of women in the Bible. From Eve, through whose seed the Savior Himself was promised, to Sarah, Rebekah, Esther, Mary, Martha, and others, the ministry of women is of inestimable value to God's church and His people.

This lesson explores some of the essential women of the New Testament church and their impact on the world around them. These women, and countless others, didn't wait for marching orders from a field general or for a committee to meet and agree on their role. Instead, they fulfilled that old bromide about success: "Find a need and fill it."

When discussing this lesson with your class, ask them to remember women in the church who played a key role in their lives. Remember: Gender is not a prerequisite for being used of God; a willing heart is the only necessary qualification.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. Transcending Boundaries (*Review the indicated verses in Luke 7, 8, and 10, and related verses from the lesson, with your class.*)

Jesus was nothing if not unusual for His time—and for all time. An observant Jew, He nonetheless reached out to women in all stations of life—even one of "ill repute"—to bring them the good news of salvation. Women supported His ministry and tended to some of His needs, and it was a woman who received the first commission to proclaim the Resurrection.

Consider This: Are there people in your church—in your corner of the world—who can bring useful and helpful things to the world around them but are held back by prejudice or misunderstanding? What are you doing to help recognize the abilities of these people and to encourage them to be available to God for His service?

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The Woman at the Well: Part 2

Read John 4:1–40, Christ’s encounter with the woman. In what way does Jesus connect the woman’s daily life and circumstances to the spiritual truth He wants to share? That is, how was He able to connect to her spiritual needs?

The woman is so excited by what she has seen and heard that she rushes back to town, not even bothering to take her water jar (*John 4:28*). She has met the Messiah, and she just has to share the news with others.

The first part of her testimony is an invitation for them to meet for themselves the Man who knew her life story (*vs. 29*). Here is a simple but classic truth about witnessing. Our mission is not to convert people. Our task is to sow the seed and bring people to Jesus. From there, the Holy Spirit cares for conversion. As the people later testify after meeting Jesus—“Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world” (*John 4:42*).

The second part of her testimony is a question—“Is not this the Christ?” (*vs. 29*). The way this question is structured in the Greek suggests that she is assuming that the answer to her question is negative. Thus, her question is literally: “He could not be the Messiah, could He?” or “This is not the Christ, is it?”

Either the woman was still not 100 percent certain about Jesus being the Messiah or, more likely, she was breaking the news gently to people who could be hostile to her for making such a claim.

Though many lessons could be taken from this account, one important one is that by doing what He did, Jesus clearly broke with the traditions of His time, witnessing to not only a woman but a Samaritan woman but then using this woman to be a messenger and evangelist for the gospel.

Jesus uses a Samaritan, a woman, and one of hardly the best moral background, too, to be a witness for Him. It is as if He purposely went against every taboo and prejudice of His time. What lessons should we draw from this for ourselves about who is or is not qualified to work for the Lord?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**II. Bridging the Gap**

Consider This: The woman at the well isn't that much different from you and from me—no matter how “good” we may view ourselves to be. Her sins, not her race or religion, had separated her from God. And, in the person of Jesus, God was right there offering reconciliation.

There is, it seems, one in every town, in every school, even in every church: a person who, for whatever reason, is an “outcast.” Maybe they're not well educated. Perhaps a person has a physical deformity or disability that limits their full participation in some activities. Or someone might just be a, well, you know—a sinner—and we can't have that kind in church, can we?

Jesus found someone who didn't like the Jews, and, frankly, whom the Jews themselves didn't like too much. She was a woman in a society in which women weren't always viewed positively. And let's face it, her personal life wasn't anything to be proud of.

Yet, this “woman at the well,” whose name we are never told, goes back home and becomes a dynamic evangelist who helps convert many of her neighbors. A woman! A sinner! Someone just like us.

When someone presents themselves for service, how do we react? Do we gracefully accept the help that is offered, or do we measure people against an artificial set of parameters designed to weed out willing servants as much as include them? If the latter, why should we reconsider that attitude?

III. Tentmakers Three

Priscilla, Aquila, and Paul had two things in common: they were all believers, and they were each tentmakers. In New Testament times, tentmaking was a necessary skill. Travelers and others depended on tents in a time when there was no Motel 6 or other lodging to make them welcome.

It was a way to make a living and thus help finance the gospel work of that era. Priscilla and Aquila opened their home to others: first to Paul, who joined them in both tentmaking and disciple-making occupations. Then, in Syria, Priscilla helped a Jewish man named Apollos, who became a believer in Jesus. This simple act of charity added one more person to the list of Christ's followers, as well as created someone who later went on to help the church at Achaia to grow.

Are there people with whom we work—or with whom we could work—

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Women in the Early Church

Throughout the book of Acts and in Paul's letters, women are often mentioned as playing a role in the early church. The early Christians did not worship in churches but instead met in people's homes, often around the meal table.

Many of these homes were owned by women such as Lydia, a businesswoman who traded purple cloth. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke met her in Philippi, in Macedonia, when they worshiped on Sabbath with a group of women gathered by the river.

Read Acts 16:14–16. In what role do we see Lydia?

What a rich story must lie behind these few words. In the space of two sentences Lydia accepts Jesus, witnesses about her newfound beliefs to her entire household, is baptized with her household, and opens up her home to the apostles. Lydia is the first recorded convert in Europe, and her home provides the base from which the apostles minister in the area.

Read Acts 18:1–3, 24–28; Romans 16:3–5; 1 Corinthians 16:19. From these various texts, how was the Lord able to use Priscilla for ministry?

After some time in Corinth, Paul sailed to Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Here Priscilla and Aquila opened up their home to a Jew named Apollos and taught him about Jesus (*Acts 18:24–26*). Apollos later became a great help to the church in Achaia (*vss. 27, 28*).

Look again at Romans 16:3–5. Paul is expressing thanks to both Priscilla and her husband. She, obviously, had a crucial role, one that Paul wanted to acknowledge. How can we be more sensitive in affirming women in whatever role they are in?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

that could also be used for God's kingdom? Be sure to pray for opportunities to identify such people and for wisdom to respond appropriately.

► **STEP 3—Practice**

Thought Questions:


1 A Samaritan woman with a checkered past seems an unlikely candidate for an evangelist. Yet, Jesus saw other potential in her. How do you see God reaching out to people today—even unlikely ones—for His flock?

2 If Jesus' interactions with women demonstrate that old "rules" about how people are to relate can be overridden by God's grace, what does that say to us, today?

Application Questions:

1 Breaking barriers runs two ways in some of the examples here. Jesus surmounts old prejudices to reach people in need, in this case women and ethnic minorities. What barriers—racial, economic, or class—can we transcend to enlarge our fellowship?

2 In the early church, women played a variety of roles and held many different positions. Should we not encourage everyone to do their part in building the church and in witnessing to the world around them?

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“I Commend to You Phoebe”

Although limited by social customs and expectations, many women in the early Christian church distinguished themselves through lives of service. The Bible rarely gives many details, but it is clear that women played an active role in the mission of the church.

Read Acts 21:9. What important principle can we get from this one short text?

Writing to the church in Rome, Paul commends to them a woman by the name of Phoebe—whom he refers to as “our sister” (*Rom. 16:1, NIV*). Phoebe belonged to the church in Cenchrea—a port city a few miles from the city of Corinth.

Paul describes Phoebe as “a servant of the church” (*vs. 1*). In his writings, Paul often uses the Greek word *diakonos*, translated here “servant” and in other places “deacon.” Whatever the correct word, the meaning is that Phoebe was one who served the church. Paul continues: “She has been a great help to many people, including me” (*vs. 2*).

Many other women in the New Testament are known for their good works. Look up the following texts. What can we gather from them and the ones already looked at about the various positions women held in the early days of Christianity? *Acts 9:36; Rom. 16:7, 12; Phil. 4:2, 3; Philemon 2.*

Not only did women play an important role behind the scenes in supporting the early church; it appears that many played a leading role in the frontline work of sharing the good news. No doubt, in the closing work of the gospel, in the work of spreading the three angels’ messages to “every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people” (*Rev. 14:6*), women will continue to have an important role.

Man or woman, what is the best way you can utilize your gifts in the work of ministry and mission?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Witnessing**

Jesus' selection of the Samaritan woman was shocking, even scandalous. Her life story didn't reflect a career of piety or even purity. Isn't our obligation in the church to reach those whom the rest of society has forgotten? Who's going to tell the beggar in the street, the single parent struggling to make ends meet, the person at the grocery store, about Jesus?

► STEP 4—Apply

Some of the greatest spiritual truths were reintroduced to Christianity by a young woman whose formal education ended around the third grade. She'd never gone to college or seminary, had no advanced degree, and didn't know the original Bible languages.

But Ellen G. White had something more important than a Harvard sheepskin: She had a heart and mind fully surrendered to God. "That I may know Him," was her plea, and in following her own "steps to Christ," she led the way for countless millions to follow.

Consider This: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," Paul writes in Galatians 3:28 (NIV).

If we are "all one in Christ Jesus," what's the hassle about? Men, women, boys, and girls each have a role to play in advancing the kingdom of God. In short, it isn't *who* we are—male, female, rich, poor—it's *whose* we are. If we truly belong to Jesus and open ourselves to Him, we'll find opportunities for service that we had never expected, at home and perhaps far away.

Further Study: “The Samaritan woman who talked with Jesus at Jacob’s well had no sooner found the Saviour than she brought others to Him. She proved herself a more effective missionary than His own disciples. The disciples saw nothing in Samaria to indicate that it was an encouraging field. Their thoughts were fixed upon a great work to be done in the future. They did not see that right around them was a harvest to be gathered. But through the woman whom they despised a whole cityful were brought to hear Jesus.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 102.

“The Lord has a work for women as well as for men to do. They can accomplish a good work for God, if they will learn first in the school of Christ the precious, all-important lesson of meekness. They must not only bear the name of Christ, but possess His spirit.”—Ellen G. White, *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, December 4, 1907.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In some parts of the world, women rarely play any leadership roles in the church. This is often dismissed as just a cultural issue; others see it as a moral one. When do customs and cultural issues become moral issues?
- 2 Ellen G. White says that the woman at the well proved a more effective missionary than Jesus’ disciples did. What special strengths can women bring to the mission of the church? Without delving into the controversial issue of women’s ordination, how can we better affirm and use the women who are part of our movement and message?
- 3 As a class, talk about Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Take that story and put it into your own culture and context. Imagine Jesus ministering so readily to someone despised and hated by your own culture, someone many folk would not even talk to. What can you learn from this exercise about what the gospel commission is really all about?

Summary: Throughout the New Testament, women appear more in background roles. However, Jesus and the apostle Paul often commended women—for their acts of love and mercy and for advancing the mission of the church.