

Following the example of Jesus

Background and context of how women were treated in Jesus' time on earth

Jesus was born into a world that discriminated women. His attitude and actions were contradictory to the norm. In the Jewish culture of the day even a husband was not to talk much with his wife in public. Any man talking to a woman in public was a rare sight and frowned upon.

Women had minimal land and property rights, they were seen as spiritually unclean while menstruating, they were segregated for worship. Women's testimonies were not generally accepted in Jewish law. Women were second class citizens.

Jesus' example of the way he treated women was in contrast to the man-made rules that men had instituted. It was clear that through Jesus' attitude and actions, he lived in a way that he was sure that women, just as much as men, are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). Jesus was more than happy to 'call out' injustices against humanity including women. We need to remember that Jesus' reactions to the women he met came from compassion for humanity generally. It was not about treating women differently from men but it was certainly about treating women differently from the way they were being treated.

Let's explore the example of Jesus and why we need to follow it.

Read the following encounters from Scripture, along with the added study notes and use the questions below to guide your group discussion.

- What is happening in this encounter with Jesus?
- How did Jesus act in this situation that challenged the norm?
- Why were these women seen as 'outcasts'?
- What can we learn from Jesus' example and what can we put into action?

The Samaritan Woman at the well – John 4:1-26

Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John— ²although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. ³So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

⁴Now he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

⁷When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

¹¹"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ¹²Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

¹³Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

¹⁷"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

¹⁹"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

²¹"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

²⁵The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

²⁶Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he."

Study Notes

For centuries up to Jesus' time the Jewish people and those from Samaria had fought with each other. What is especially unusual, is a Jewish man speaking with a Samaritan woman.

Do you know that many Jewish men started the day with a prayer thanking God that he was not a Gentile (someone who is not Jewish), a slave, or a woman! People from Samaria and especially women from Samaria were treated as outcasts by many.

This woman had other reasons why she was treated as an outcast too (v18).

It was noon when the woman came to draw water. One of the hottest times of the day and tells us more of her 'outcast' title as nobody would draw water at that time. It was the only time she felt she could go without meeting others and possibly receiving abuse.

Jesus heals a woman who was subject to bleeding for 12 years – Luke 8:43-48

⁴³ And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. ⁴⁴ She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.

⁴⁵ “Who touched me?” Jesus asked.

When they all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you.”

⁴⁶ But Jesus said, “Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.”

⁴⁷ Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. ⁴⁸ Then he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”

Study Notes

The law would state that a woman menstruating was ritually unclean. This woman had been bleeding for 12 years! She was alone as nobody would want to be near to her, nobody would hug her. She was fed up! No-one could heal her but her faith drove her to Jesus.

It's a beautiful encounter where Jesus restores her health but also her dignity. He calls her 'Daughter' giving her a title of belonging. She may have been cast aside for 12 years by those around her but she is a child of God.

The woman caught in the act of adultery - John 8:3-11

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

¹¹"No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Study Notes

Obvious note here that in order for a woman to be caught in the act of adultery, a man had to be committing adultery too! Jesus said as much when he asked those standing there to throw the first stone if they were without sin. No-one could do it because not only had the woman sinned, the man she was with had sinned and everyone in the crowd had sinned too! Jesus exposed everyone's sin.

The mosaic law did speak of execution for both the man and woman caught in the act of adultery, not just the woman. While we can argue the severity of the punishment, the issue here is that the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law had changed the reading of this law to oppress and violate only the woman.

Jesus did not excuse her sin but treated her with dignity and without condemnation. He asked her to change but did not make her feel guilty.

The law was and is important but grace and forgiveness was being highlighted.

Luke 10:38-42 – Mary and Martha

³⁸As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

⁴¹"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴²but few things are needed—or indeed only one.^[a] Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Study Notes

Jewish women were prohibited from reading Scripture or being instructed in it. Nevertheless, they were subject to its teaching in every aspect of their lives. By affirming Mary's right to listen and *learn*, Jesus treats her as an equal to any Jewish man of the time. It is important to note, however, that Jesus does not rebuke Martha for pursuing her own desires, simply that she should allow Mary to do the same. In this case Jesus does say that Mary chose what was better but does not rebuke Martha for taking on the practical jobs. Thereby Jesus is able to reinforce that each deserves her own agency.