

Part 26: Commissioning Grace and Spectacular Women

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We've been working through Luke's account of the gospel of Jesus Christ and in Luke 8 we are going to begin to see Jesus' parables on what the kingdom of God is like. But this week, for three short verses we are going to pause before Luke begins to tell us what Jesus says about the kingdom of God, and we are going to see what Jesus' followers show us about the kingdom of God.

Let me read our passage once more to begin: **Luke 8:1-3.**

Jesus is continuing his ministry in the northern part of Judea and Luke is here reminding us of his main ministry role even in the midst of his miracles: proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. Here we see one of Luke's favorite words come up again. Jesus is literally, proclaiming and "gospel-ing"—he is good newsing all over the place.

This gospel which Jesus is gospeling is the good news that Jesus will do everything required to save sinners and restore them to God. While we will look more at what that means later on, at this moment what Luke wants us to see is that this message of good news is drawing people to Jesus. The message of the gospel is a compelling message which captivates and commissions people.

This is why we are stopping and pausing on this text. Here in this text we see the apostles, and a group of spectacular women who followed Jesus and supported his ministry. We are committed to expositional preaching at Sovereign Hope because we believe every word of God is inerrant, unfailing, and able to present us mature in Christ. So we believe that not only is there pervasive truthfulness in God's word, but through the power of the Holy Spirit there is pervasive usefulness in this text as well.

We are going to pause on these three short verses for a couple primary reasons. The first is that we see in this text a reaffirmation of what Luke has been showing us all throughout his gospel—anyone can follow Jesus because anyone can be saved by Jesus, but anyone who is saved by Jesus is one who is then called to follow the path of the Kingdom of God.

That's our main point today: **The gospel enables anyone to walk with Jesus, being healed by Jesus for the service of Jesus.**

But secondly we are going to approach this point through the lens of gender. This is timely because our world is up in arms over gender in just about every sphere right now from transgendered rights to the Roe V. Wade decision. One New York Times columnist wrote an article this week which she titled: "The Far Right and the Far Left Agree on One Thing: Women Don't Count."

She concludes by saying: "Whether Trumpist or traditionalist, fringe left activists or academic ideologue, misogynists from both extremes of the political spectrum relish equally the power to shut women up."

This struggle, and "war against" language is not merely a Christian issue, it's a culture issue. One which has found itself rearing its head in every culture throughout history.

But the Christian story makes the most sense of it and provides the most hope in it.

God created us male and female. This was not an afterthought or a side effect that needed to be worked through. This, according to Genesis 1:27 and Ephesians 1 was the eternal plan of God before the world began. The present hostility is a result of the sin that stained God's perfect creation, but the hope in the midst of this is seen in this text.

Luke's inclusion of Jesus' followers here is therefore not merely an introduction, but a picture of what the kingdom of God looks like. Just like Jesus miracles showed us a supernatural glimpse into the future pervasive reality of God's coming kingdom, here in Jesus' followers we see a glimpse of that as well. A glimpse of unity and diversity captivated by the experience of gospel glory.

Not only do we see the general beauty and transformative power of the gospel in this passage, but we see the third way that our world needs. It is neither far left, nor far right. Yet it is also not the middle way. The gospel is not middle ground. It's a message of life and death. It calls us not to passive comfort but to radical repentance and costly sacrifice. But this way is the way where we can find the presence of Jesus, peace with one another and purpose in all of life.

So with that said we are going to look at three distinct relationships inside this text. First we are going to see **Men and Women in the Kingdom**, then we are going to look at **Women and Jesus in the Kingdom**, and lastly we are going to get a glimpse of **Disciples and Jesus in the Kingdom**.

In Luke 8:1-2 we see two groups who are uniquely following Jesus at this point: the twelve and a group of women.

Luke's general term for anyone who follows Jesus is "disciple." Discipleship is not for the elite or motivated, you cannot be a Christian without being a disciple. But from this broader group of followers Jesus had chosen "the twelve," or maybe as you've heard them, "the twelve disciples."

We saw this dynamic back in **Luke 6:13**. These apostles were disciples, but they were 12 men uniquely chosen to be Jesus' nearest companions and founders of the Christian church.

But here Luke doesn't speak as he did in Luke 6 of the apostles and this broader group. But instead he speaks in the same breath of these hand chosen representatives of the New Israel and a specific and extraordinary group of women. Both were with him, that's important here. When it comes to Jesus showing us the kingdom of God there are men and women who though different, have the privilege of serving Jesus.

This is our first point today: **Men and Women in the Kingdom**. There really is a remarkable thing Luke is doing here. He was speaking of the men who would go on to be unique and prophetic in the church, and in the same breath mentions this group of women. Paul does something similar at the end of the book of Romans where he says this: **Romans 16:7**.

Here is Junia, a female, who herself was well known to the apostles.

These subtle inclusions show the third way of the gospel. There is a distinction between the apostles and these women just as there was between the apostles and the male disciples of Jesus. These women were women, and they were not apostles.

Yet despite the distinction between the two groups, there was a shared unity of value, purpose and enjoyment. These image bearers, who loved Jesus, were not males, they were not apostles, and yet grace had so captured their hearts that they didn't have to be anything else in order to be saved by, satisfied with, and joyfully serving the ministry of Jesus—so much so that they are mentioned in the same breath as the twelve pillars of the New Testament church.

Maleness is not femaleness. Femaleness is not maleness. God created this distinction. God even created different ways in which in the context of marriage and in the church those gender realities have impacts in different roles. But at the same time life in the kingdom of Jesus is not a life where maleness is the life of privilege and femaleness is the life of whatever falls off the table.

Gender matters deeply in some areas, and matters less in others. It matters in regards to certain roles, but matters little in regards to other, much larger realities. Take for instance gender as it relates to being an elder. Biblically speaking the office of elder is reserved for men. But maleness is a requirement for an elder, not a qualification for it.

Yes, there were no women who were apostles, and no women who were elders. But there were also many men, who were fully men, who are also biblically prohibited from fulfilling the role of elder. Being a male doesn't automatically mean you are privileged over others to certain roles, it does mean you meet a requirement, but it doesn't qualify you for special privileges.

Ladies, there are many men walking the streets of our town. At a molecular level they are husband material in that they are male. But we know there is a difference between being biologically husband material and being actual husband material.

Qualified, called and competent men are to be elders according to the requirement of gender, but their role is based on far more than their gender. Paul says husbands are to be the head of their wives as Christ was the head of the church. But some men who meet the biological requirement of headship shouldn't be the head of a screwdriver let alone the head of a wife or a church. That doesn't mean there isn't innate differences between the genders, but it does mean that our worth isn't defined purely by our ability to meet a requirement for a role.

You see when some scholars encounter Romans 16 and Junia, they try and manipulate the Greek to say that because she was so well known to the apostles she must have been an apostle and therefore that is why she was valued. But the joy of life in the kingdom of God is that our value is not dependent upon our role. If Junia was only well known because she was an apostle that's actually belittling the fact that Junia was known simply for being Junia! What Luke has showed us time and time again in Jesus' ministry is that the way of power and acceptance in the kingdom of God doesn't look like the world's.

The world cannot understand value apart from positions of value but the gospel presents value based off your relationship to the person of value: Jesus Christ. Here these women, though not apostles, were so profoundly valuable to Jesus that the Holy Spirit has preserved a eulogy to them here in this text.

Our culture tries to tell us that who we are is based off what we can achieve, who we can marry and who we are attracted to. But the way of the Kingdom gives us something better. It says your value and who you are is based off your relationship to the God who created you. It is as Paul says, **Galatians 3:27-28**.

Who has value and purpose in the Kingdom of God? Men and women, moms and dads, waitresses and mailmen saved by grace and commissioned to ministry.

Through both his gospel and the book of Acts, Luke upholds a clear distinction of males as the apostles and the male only office of elder. Yet, more than any other gospel writer Luke shows Jesus' heart for women and women's hearts for Jesus.

We get to see this relationship in our next point: **Women and Jesus in the Kingdom**. Read with me: **Luke 8:2-3**.

I have three daughters, I know those daughters are growing up in a world where the default message to them as women regarding Christianity is that Christianity is anti-women. What I want them to see in passages like this is that there is nothing more categorically and intellectually false than that.

In fact to say Christianity is anti-women is actually an anti-woman sentiment. A 2016 study of 192 countries found that women, more than men, identified as Christian. It is women, more than men who more readily attended church and pray. While data is hard to attain given the persecution there, in China (a country whose population is disproportionately male) it is estimated the underground Christian church is two thirds female. Here in this passage in Luke we see a group of many women who saw in Jesus the hope of salvation and identity which the world could never provide.

Now in contemporary religions of Jesus' day it wasn't odd for a leader to garner support from women who traveled with him. But most of those relationships were sexual exploitive in nature.

Our culture often speaks of the war against women and directs their sights at the Christian church. But when you look from a historical perspective two things are very clear. First whenever any heretical sect broke off from the true gospel of Jesus Christ it inevitably veered into some sort of sexually deviant practices in which women were primarily commodities and properties. Such practices do not come as a result of nearness to Jesus' gospel, but actually are a direct result of the distance from Jesus' gospel.

Secondly, in societies where sexual freedom was elevated and Christian marriage was undermined, women suffered. This is true today and is part of why there is such a visceral reaction by some to the overturning of Roe V. Wade. For many the removal of abortion incites terror into their lives because women are biologically more vulnerable than males. The true war against women isn't those who wish to protect children and walk with women, but it's against men who get women pregnant and run away.

A woman cannot run away from her pregnancy, but a man can. Sinful as those decisions might be, the weight of this burden and potential cost on her family, her relationships and her career is significant.

This is why the church should be willing to help in a number of ways. I can give you three right now. First, support these women. I've made mention of this before but over a third of all women who get an abortion identify as church attenders. That means that we need to create a culture where women who find themselves in a situation of unplanned pregnancies realize not only their need to repent and Jesus' zealotness to forgive, but the heart of the church to care for those who are simultaneously sinners and saints. This means helping them, caring for them, and supporting them in the conversations and ongoing care.

It also means that we should support and challenge the men in our bodies and in our homes. God made men differently. But the call to men is selfless service of the other not selfish gain from the vulnerable. For every woman who is pregnant, there is a man who also needs the good news of gospel correction and gospel comfort.

Lastly, we should fight for the health of our marriages which already exist and those that are coming. Marriages, sinful, broken, and imperfect marriages in light of the gospel are still one of the greatest mercies God gives to protect the vulnerable and the weak.

We want to move towards all three of these things not because women need husbands, or because women need the church. Those are both good gifts, but we lean into these things because more than anything else women need Jesus. These acts of obedience cause us to walk nearer and nearer to the Jesus who takes broken individuals and loves them to wholeness and boldness.

This is what we see with these women.

Now we might bristle at this and thinking, “Why is it that women need to be made whole and bold?” But this misses the whole point in Luke's gospel! Everyone needs to be made whole and bold. It's not that these women were so weak and so broken that they needed a savior. It's that everyone is so weak and so broken that they need a savior. It's actually their right understanding of their weaknesses that gives them their greatest strength. It is a direct fulfillment of Jesus' word that the least in the kingdom is the greatest.

What's profound about passages like this is that we not only see Jesus' love for women. But we see these women's love for Jesus. Of course Jesus loves them. He's Jesus. But more than that, these women, just like the woman we saw last week, love Jesus because they understand they have been forgiven much.

As we read this text we see that these women were with Jesus, and were healed by Jesus, and served Jesus. But we can see that there is a distinct order to this process. It reads like this: these women were presently with Jesus, and had already been healed by Jesus, and were now putting themselves to active support of Jesus.

This is what life in the Kingdom of God looks like! While Jesus was on earth both the physical realities and the spiritual realities aligned like a full gospel eclipse. When people come to Jesus they are healed totally by Jesus, spiritually and physically, and then they spend the rest of their lives walking in relational intimacy with him and serving joyfully the needs of his ministry.

In Missoula's crazy housing market potential buyers often write letters to the seller trying to set themselves apart from other offers. They attempt to convince the sellers as to why they are worthy of the gift of the house.

This is how the way of the world works. But what we see in this text is that we don't have to walk to Jesus with our letters of recommendation, but we get to walk to Jesus with the confession of our honest need and he then invites those honest, sinful, individuals to dwell with him. To be healed by Jesus we merely take our sins to Jesus.

But to taste the goodness of Jesus' love is to come out the other side entirely different. There's no better good news for men than this gospel. There's no better good news for women than this gospel. There's no better kingdom to live in than a kingdom where anyone can come to Jesus and experience his love and find deep purpose in our service.

The beautiful thing about these women is that whatever they encountered in Jesus' love for them, it caused them to endure. This same group of Galilean women show up and endure the cross when even most of Jesus' apostles fall away. This same group of Galilean women witness the empty tomb and declare the first message of resurrected life to the apostles.

This is our final point today: **Disciples and Jesus in the Kingdom.**

While we see Luke explicitly make mention of many women who support Jesus, these many women are of great encouragement to any who would be a disciple of Jesus. Anyone who follows Jesus is called to a life of serving Jesus, and these women ought to light a fire in our own hearts.

Women in the Roman world were seen already as second class citizens, which makes the conversion of these ladies so profound. What little, hard fought capital, they already gained in the eyes of the world, they like the apostle Paul, considered it as rubbish and took on more cultural humiliation by following Jesus. They did all of this because they were motivated not by worldly power but by gospel grace.

In this there is great hope for us all. J.C. Ryle, the old English pastor had this beautiful quote on this passage which I wanted to share with you all in full: **"It was not a woman who sold the Lord for thirty pieces of silver. They were not women who forsook the Lord in the garden and fled. It was not a woman who denied him three times in the high priest's house. But they were women who wailed and lamented when Jesus was led forth to be crucified. They were women who stood to the last by the cross. And they were women who were first to visit the grave 'where the Lord lay.'** Great indeed is the power of the grace of God. Let the recollections of these women encourage all the daughters of Adam who read of them, to take up the cross and to follow Christ. Let no sense of weakness, or fear of falling away, keep them back from a decided profession of religion. The mother of a large family, with limited means, may tell us that she has no time for religion. The wife of an ungodly husband may tell us that she does not dare take up religion. The young daughter of worldly parents may tell us that it is impossible for her to have any religion. The maid-servant in the midst of unconverted companions, may tell us that in her place a person cannot follow religion. But they are all wrong, quite wrong. With Christ nothing is impossible. Let them think again, and change their minds. Let them begin boldly in the strength of Christ and trust him for the consequence. The Lord Jesus never changes. He who enabled 'many women' to serve him faithfully while he was on earth, can enable women to serve him, glorify him, and be his disciples at the present day."

Who has something with which to serve Jesus? Anyone who has been loved by him.

The beauty of the church is that it was founded on the prophets and the apostles. The structure of the church is that it is led by Jesus Christ and placed in the direct supervision of pastors and elders. Yet the work of service and of ministry is not exclusive to a role but the pervasive reality of all who are loved by Jesus.

To walk with Jesus is to be commissioned to serve Jesus.

When the Emperor Trajan was persecuting the church less than a century after Jesus' death, one of his minions wrote him a letter where he said, "I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition."

Here were by worldly standards two female slaves—a social status which was lowest to the bottom. And yet slaves to the world, they were deacons to the church. Held by worldly standards to the bondage of labor, but by grace freed to serve the church out of love. And despite enduring torture they uttered nothing else by the truths of the gospel.

Here we see Joanna who was married to a man who worked directly for Jesus' enemy Herod. Great was her risk in following and even supporting Jesus, but here was a woman who considered the reproach of Christ greater than all the treasures of Rome.

Here was Mary Magdalene of whom we know a bit more, who was in the gospels never married, and Susanna of whom we know almost nothing. In these two women we see great hope for anyone who is single!

Marriage is a wonderful God-ordained gift to the church and to the world. But how pervasive is a view of discipleship and service to God which is only manifest in the confines of marriage. How many men think they have nothing to give in terms of leadership and service if not in the home? How many women feel they have nothing to offer the church except being a wife who loves and cares for her husband and children?

All of those desires are noble and good, but the service of the Kingdom calls you to serve Jesus now with what you have!

These women, and many others, support Jesus with what they had. They had financial ability and so from their own finances they cared for Jesus and his apostles while they traveled.

What a great picture of unity and diversity inside the church. We saw earlier when Jesus called some of his apostles they left everything. Indeed, Peter says to Jesus in Matthew 19 that the twelve apostles did leave everything behind.

And while the call to follow Jesus does call some to leave everything, it calls many others to give everything—to look at your life and realize that if we have been saved by Jesus, and if we are walking with Jesus, then we have something that is of use to Jesus and it is our greatest joy to serve towards that end!

Might we all show our world a glimpse of this kingdom by walking with Jesus, healed by Jesus and living for the service of Jesus.