

“Man looketh on the outward appearance, God looketh on the heart.” Things have not changed very much since the Lord helped correct Samuel's poor vision. Few men see beyond a woman's outward appearance. Few men can see beyond the beauty or the gender. Few men seem to appreciate the worth or the value of a woman as an equal. Perhaps it is the testosterone that clouds the judgment and renders men as weak in this one area as it makes them strong in another. Men and women have had difficulties living together since the original couple was expelled from paradise. As it was from the beginning, the first century was truly a man's world.

Woman had a world also. It was smaller and more painful. The ancient world of the woman was one of endless service and suffering. Few men have experienced the level or intensity of physical pain that most women find common in childbirth. While men experience their own kind of anguish upon the battle field, or in the bowels of the earth's salt and coal mines, the daughters of Eve live closer to and have a higher threshold for pain. Even today in third world countries it is the women who carry the wood and the water. And it would seem that the “fairer” sex is not treated “fairly.”

It is important to point out that even in the industrialized world women are still being deceived. While they may not be carrying the wood and water many have believed the lies and false promises of rebellious humanism and labor under a greater load. They stagger under the enormous weight of guilt, and expectations, incompatible aspirations, and unresolvable contradictions. They were told they could “have it all” but were not told they would bear the consequences. While women were never intended by God to be chattel, they were never intended to be men. Christianity does not try to “put women in their place.” Instead, in biblical Christianity women find their place, and no one finds their place until they find God.

Jesus treated women and children with equal respect and dignity deserved by every soul. He took women as seriously as he did men. When the woman with the issue of blood touched the hem of his garment, his world stood still while he turned his attention to her and focused on this single soul. When a woman “taken in adultery” was dragged before him by a tribunal of hypocrites she found shelter, equality and mercy in the court of his judgment. When sisters disputed about housework, he appealed to their higher selves, and when they cried he wiped away their tears.

He understood their interest in beauty which was often the only currency with which they could bargain for a better life. He also seemed sympathetic to their fragile spirit and delicate temperaments. He spoke to the woman of Sychar as a precious human being and brushed aside past failures, preconceived rules of protocol, and traditional prejudice. He appealed to her higher hopes that somehow had survived among the moral ruins of five failed marriages and offered her parched spirit living water. He spoke to her as neither Samaritan or charlatan- but took her seriously as a sincere soul in need of love and grace.

Jesus lent his presence to the wedding at Cana and so gives his blessing to married and domestic life. It is all too easy to become caught up in the world of commerce, government, religion, or war and begin to imagine that these are the real arenas of life. They are not. The world of far greater importance is the woman's world. The woman is God's partner in creation. Every time another baby takes its first gasp of oxygen and lets out a wail it announces another miracle. It was from a woman that God entered the world. It is in the arms of a woman that early life learns of love. It is in the arms of this “weaker” sex that the man child first finds strength, safety and security.

The woman's world revolved around the home. When a woman gave birth to a son she was considered to be unclean for forty days. If she had a girl the period was doubled. On the eighth day the village mohel (specialist) performed the rite of circumcision on male babies. The woman was obliged to visit the temple in Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice for the birth of her child as well as to be purified from

her ordeal. The sacrifice was to be a lamb or six silver shekels (the large sum was usually returned to the family according to tradition), poor people might offer a pigeon.

A child was weaned between his second and third year. All children lived in the woman's world until the age of six. At that time the father undertook to begin training in law. Sons were taken to the synagogue where they learned Hebrew, the Torah, and the Traditions. It was from an early age that a Jew learned about the restrictions of a pious life. This life prohibited walking more than 2,000 cubits on the Sabbath or from engaging in any of thirty-nine forbidden activities on the holy day.

It was also incumbent on a father to teach his son a trade. A rabbi had written, "he who does not teach his son a trade brings him up to be a robber." The father's side became a classroom. A son learned about life in the workshop, the field, or the marketplace. What your father was, what you would become. Such was the die cast by tradition. Few ever ventured from the world of their forbears. It was something of an astonishment when James and John forsook their father to follow Jesus. And who could imagine the son of a carpenter doing mighty miracles? (Matt. 13:55)

When a boy reached the age of thirteen he became a son of the law. Males usually married by age eighteen, females at the age of puberty (officially age 12 1/2). Mary was probably no more than fourteen when she gave birth to the Son of God. Fourteen is but a child today. Marriages were arranged and were usually within the clan. When the two families agreed on a price for the bride, a bargain was struck and the betrothal was celebrated. A one year period of betrothal was official and the groom declared publically to all "She is my wife and I her husband from today and forever." Betrothal could only be broken by giving a bill of divorce. At the end of this "engagement" the wedding ceremony took place with the bride wearing the finest crown and showy dress. The groom's friends arrived at the bride's father's house, placed her on a litter and carried her to the groom's house while singing of her beauty and the groom's bravery. Music filled the air as harps, flutes, castanets and tambourines joined in celebration. Oil, wine, perfume, wafted aromatically through the air. The wedding celebration lasted a week. Guests brought gifts, and hopefully the expense of festivities was offset by these.

Jesus touched the world of women and blessed it. But while, as today, the world of Jesus was a man's world, he ignored the taboos and man-made boundaries of prejudice that kept women from being seriously considered as full partners in the game of life. The life of a woman was harsh by our standards. Mary must have made many trips to the well at Nazareth to fulfill her domestic duties. It would have been her responsibility to tend the fire, and grind the grain. She would feed her family a diet of porridge made of wheat or barley. Included in a well rounded diet would be beans, lentils, cucumbers, onions, garlic, olive oil, dates, figs, and pomegranates. The family gathered around a common dish into which each would reach or "dip." Wine mixed with water was the common drink for all, and meat was rarely served and that only on special occasions or feast days. The living quarters would be transformed into a sleeping quarter with the rolling out of a bed mat upon the floor. There is little in our world of excess, opulence, and splendor that Jesus would identify with today. His life, even by first century standards was one of meagerness. Jesus would teach that life does not consist in the abundance of things" (Lk. 12:15). Or as someone recently said, "the best things in life, are not things." His life was not to be measured by materials he amassed. As a matter of fact, through his teaching, his life, and his death it could be better said, "he who gives the most, lives the most." More than any other single soul in this world or in any other, Jesus gave the most.

The world of Jesus was a world of relationships. Women are so much better at building relationships than men. Women are more sensitive. Women are more likely to talk, but they are more likely to listen also.

Our perceptions of life during the time of Jesus has been distorted by a millennium of imaginations on canvas, and a lifetime of sentimental Christmas cards. Our picture of Palestine has been prejudiced by our memories of sparkling clean children wearing their father's bath robes and donning towels on their heads during the traditional church Christmas pageant. The truth would not be so sanitary. A more realistic picture of Jewish children in Jesus' day would not even be that of the reformed Jewish

children of today lighting the Chanuka candel, but rather more likely akin to the Palestinian children seen on television casting haunting stares into the camera and sometimes throwing stones. They would be poor, dirty, and openly displaying the contempt their parents tried to conceal. Today the Jews are in control of Palestine as they attempt to tame an “under-class” of restless Palestinians who have a different faith, and different traditions, and an indomitable spirit. The Jew of first century Jerusalem closely resembles the Palestinian under Israeli rule today, proud, dangerous, and defiant.

Life was by no means easy. Survival was in no way guaranteed. The marketplace was a microcosm of life and there Jesus gathered images with which to construct object lessons and teach spiritual truths. His father, as a carpenter, might have wore a wood chip behind his ear, and although skilled and capable in making plows, wheels, furniture, and saddles, may have known a scarcity of business and lack of work for Nazareth was not much of a place.

Houses were usually mud-brick and consisted of one room, roofed with thatch-like reed mats. Except for the roof, the house Jesus grew up in would be almost identical to many of those in Arab villages today.

Life during the first century was hard, but hardest of all for the woman. A widow’s sorrow in the loss of her husband was great, but greater still if she had no children or family to care for her in her need and old age. A widow without children was not the heir of her husband’s wealth, often it was a surviving brother who inherited any wealth. To be a widow without sons to care for her was a frightening proposition. Women had no legal standing or rights. The ministry of Jesus was not to change the laws, or change the system. It was not to “make women equal” or “level the playing field.” Jesus touched women and changed their lives by transforming their spirits by their faith in him.

The gospels are filled with stories of encounters Jesus had with women. Record of his visits to Bethany tell us little of his conversations with Lazarus, but are a wealth of insight as he interacted with Mary and Martha. And Lazarus was but the object lesson, Martha was the student, and we are the recipients of truth found in the comforting words of the Master to the sorrowing sister, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”

In the defence of a helpless woman, Jesus warns “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.” It was in a conversation with a Samaritan woman that we learn about God and worship. “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.” It was this woman who opened the way into Samaria. Jesus broke into a funeral procession and the grief of a widow in Nain and demonstrated his power and compassion as he delivered the dead from death.

God is known to us as Father, and so He is. Yet Jesus shows another important side of God. Jesus shows us tenderness, and kindness whenever he encountered women and children. David understood the ways of God when he wrote “Thy gentleness has made me great” (Psalm 18:35). A bruised reed he does not break and a smoking flax he does not quench. We can learn much about God in Jesus’ encounters with women in a man’s world, and men can learn much about themselves as they consider the Lord’s relationship to the daughters of Eve.

The Egyptians left the Sphinx, their tombs and their pyramids. The Greeks left their marble Acropolis and their art. The Romans left behind their roads and their aqueducts. The Jewish world of Jesus left Jesus. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and his short life lived in quiet obscurity, and his brief ministry lived with and unhurried dignity, which changed that world forever. Someone said that a mind once stretched by an idea will never return to its original shape. So when the Logos entered history it was forever enlarged by the message of God’s Kingdom, and this world has never been the same.

The Mystics 7

This Jewish sect lived on the edge of the apocalypse. For them it was a minute before midnight. What good are material possessions, and creature comforts when one is on the threshold of eternity? Little good, and so like all ascetic communities then and since. their life was Spartan and their possessions few. They did leave behind one treasure, however. They left behind what we know as the Dead Sea Scrolls which were discovered in 1947 when a bedouin boy cast a stone into a cave at Qumran.

Although these are not mentioned by name in Scripture, we know that they formed as a movement during the second century BC during the Hasmonean dynasty. Their leader was known as the “Teacher of Righteousness” who withdrew into the desert region in order to fulfill Isaiah 40:3 “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” If one to ask an Essene what he was doing in the desert he would no doubt have replied that he was “waiting for God.” They fully expected God to culminate the ages, execute judgment and reward the just. Some suggest that John the Baptist belonged to this group. Although he and all religious people would have been familiar with these people who isolated themselves in desert caves, John could not have been one of them. John sought contact with the masses, the Essenes sought isolation. These were the equivalent to the monks and mystics of later middle ages. These were the ones who gave up on the world and life as the average person knew it.

These most extreme separatists were pacifists. They would not resist nor fight against the occupying Roman force since they considered the plight of the Jews as a punishment from God against a people who violated His holy law. They practiced continual cleansing ceremonies and performed ritual baths. They baptized themselves daily, and according to Philip Yancy “maintained a strict diet, did not defecate on the Sabbath, wore no jewelry, took no oaths, and held all material goods in common. They hoped their faithfulness would encourage the advent of the Messiah.” This expectation that their observance of the law and desire for purity would usher in the coming of the Messiah is a belief still held by the modern day Hasidim.

John the baptist must have been influenced by these enthusiasts. John was an ascetic and ate only locusts and wild honey. John, also abstained from the use of any grape products including wine. Imagine the consternation of his disciples and the Essenes when they saw or heard of Jesus and his disciples eating, and drinking with what looked to them as reckless abandon. How could the Messiah eat with publicans and sinners? How could he eat with unwashed (ceremonially) hands. How could the Messiah laugh, and mingle with unclean and common people. These holier-than-thous were astounded by the audacity of this teacher from Galilee who many were suggesting was the promised one.

It is obvious from the continuation of this group in Qumran that they did not have faith in Jesus. It seemed that they were purer, or more faithful than he (in their eyes). Here is another example of man making God in their image instead of allowing the Divine to be the potter and they the clay. These were blind to the untold blessings and beauty of life and the world although fallen. In their imaginations every tree, not just one tree, was forbidden in the garden of life. These were those who buried God’s countless gifts and buried them in napkins, thinking God a hard task master. Sad are those individuals who fail to enjoy, laugh, and drink in life as God intended it to be.

Isolationists are always isolated from God. No sooner does an isolationist close the door against the world but Satan congratulates them for their zeal and piety. No sooner do they close the door on the world, but what they close the door of God himself. Their world is so small there is no room for the Almighty.

Theirs was a religion of works. The ladder they climbed was steep and designed to be the most

difficult to climb. Every age has its share of sad souls who throw God's gifts back at him and choose to eat sorrow and engage in a form of religious macochism. In another age such individuals would whip their flesh, starve it, or force it to wear a coarse hair shirt until their skin was bleeding and raw. They mistook pain for piety and poverty for wealth.

The community at Qumran was particular about who might join them in their holy congregation "No madman, lunatic, simpleton, fool, blind, maimed, lame, deaf, nor minor may enter into the Community." How different from the inclusiveness of Jesus who said "Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." How different from the Christ who sent his disciples to invite the "halt, blind, maimed, and the lame to come to his supper." How different from the friend of sinners who also welcomed the little children and said "suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

The Kingdom of Heaven as Jesus spoke of it was very different than the one created by the Essenes. Why would one want to enter into such a sterile, colorless, and tasteless existence? There are those still who picture the kingdom of heaven as did the Essenes. Rising early for vespers, fastings, meditations, silences, and prayers. Isolation and depredation, that is heaven to some. If this is the picture the church is giving of God's kingdom, no wonder people are fleeing from it rather than fleeing to it.

To be sure there is much to be said for quiet time, fasting, prayers, and meditations as sacred disciplines, but they are only to prepare a man for life. They were never meant to be his life. Jesus said, "I am come that you might have life and have it more abundantly."

Many historical experiments have been launched in the spirit of the Essenes inside and outside of Protestantism. Early American history owns its share of communes and separated societies that sought to humble the flesh, by working it hard, denying it pleasure, sleeping on planks and using only a wood block for a pillow. All these adventures have failed as they always shall. God came not to take away as much as he came to give.

Many attempts at sanctified societies have been launched only to wither and die. The Shakers have left us with little legacy other than their furniture. The Shakers began in France during the reign of Louis the XIV. They originally deemed themselves the "Prophets" and claimed unique revelations and expected the imminent second coming of Jesus Christ which prompted them to return to primitive Christianity. Fleeing France and then persecution in England, Shakerism was carried to the US by Mother Ann Lee who set up a colony near Albany NY in 1774 whose three major goals were withdrawal from the world, celibacy, and perfection.

Gentiles 8

The Jewish nation has always suffered at the hands of non-Jews. Not only were they overrun and carried away into Babylon and Egypt, they were almost exterminated in the days of Haman, and later during the rule of Antiochus Epihanes who vowed to blot out the Jews both root and branch. Today we read incredible stories of “ethnic cleansing,” and who can comprehend the depth of human depravity found in what the Third Reich called the “final solution.” It is difficult for the lamb to live at ease when ever surrounded by wolves, and what must have been the emotional state and condition when the wolves, the sons of Romulus and Remus, came to govern the land of the sheep?

Gentiles were considered “unclean” (Jn . 18:28). They were seen as “dogs” (Matt. 15:26,27). No pious practicing Jew would be caught dead, at a Gentile’s table. Gentiles were known to be idolaters. They broke the commandments of heaven on every hand. Their very presence was an affront to piety.

The feeling of the average Jew in the times of Christ toward the gentiles is difficult to find comparison in modern times. On the one hand, consider the feelings of a Brahman towards an Untouchable in caste conscious India. The disdain and contempt a Frenchman had of the occupying German army during World War Two is another comparison. Consider the hostility the Muslim has for those who eat pork and mix these emotions up to become one and the result might begin to approach the depth of animosity the Hebrew had for the Gentile in first century Jerusalem.

Our secular world has little resemblance to first century Jerusalem. We live in a time beyond Rousseau’s Age of Reason. We have our science “so-called” of psychology, and sickness is attributed to disease not demons. Today we know that thunder is a collision of atmospheric elements, not the voice and anger of God. While the age of Jesus appeared to be a religious one, the average Jew was not so different from the gentile in that much of his belief was governed by superstition and by tradition. Jesus taught that “narrow is the way that leads unto life and few there be that find it.” Paul placed Jewish privilege in perspective when he pointed out “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

The Temple at Jerusalem was trinitarian in its spiritual design. It consisted of the outer court, the holy place, and the holy of holies. The holy of holies was where the ark of the covenant rested in solitude and sacredness visited but once a year on the day of atonement by the high priest, and then not without blood. The holiest place rested on the highest level of Mt. Moriah and was void of all figures, sculpture, or images. The facade, however was covered with plates of gold that when hit by the rays of the rising sun caused those standing on Olivet to shade their eyes when looking at the Temple’s glory. Twelve steps beneath this was a second level was known as the court of the priests. Here a great laver and an altar of burning were the chief objects and center of attention. The holy place was a center of activity, ritual and righteousness as white robed priests offered up sacrifices, offerings and prayers for the sins, solicitations, and supplications of the people. From this holy platform three flights of stairs led down to the court of Israel, sometimes called the sanctuary held priests quarters as well as the hall of the Sanhedrin, among other offices.

Fourteen steps beneath the court of the Israelites was the court of the Gentiles. Warnings were posted at every portal entrance that gentiles dare not enter. Herod himself, did not qualify for entry. But what Herod could not do in the Holy places, he made up for in this outer court with architectural splendor and oriental opulence. Here was “Solomon’s Porch” with its huge Corinthian columns in double rows forming cloisters that faced the Mount of Olives. It was here that magnificent arch ways greeted the world. It was here we find the “beautiful gate” and it is here we would have found Jesus ministering to the people.

It was the Jewish hatred of idolatry that caused the Jew to erect a religious force-field of separation between them and the gentile for fear of contamination and corruption. A gentile entering a Jewish home defiled the home and necessitated a complete spiritual and physical cleansing. A Hebrew was

counted unclean if he unwittingly walked into the shadow of a pagan totem or standard. Gentiles were considered as being children of the serpent and Eve the spell from which they were delivered at Mt. Sinai.

Consider how difficult it would be for someone to break through the many barriers and obstacles of Judaism in order to draw close to the truth of God. How hopeless was the state of the gentile in the mind of the Jew, but “God so loved the world.” When a centurion came seeking relief for his servant, it must have been a piece of astonishment to the disciples that Jesus said “I will come and heal him.” Only the centurion’s great faith prevented a scandal, for in the mind of this gentile a word from the Master was as good as a visit.

When Jesus visited the regions Tyre and Sidon he was in gentile territory. Even then he called attention to the wall that separated the Children of Moses from the heathen. It was as if he would hold up a veil of difficulty to test a sinner’s sincerity. “Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children; bread, and to cast it unto the dogs.” Most would have been insulted enough and so wounded of pride that they would have responded with anger, but not this woman. She proved that the kingdom was not for the Jew, but for the humble. She replied, “Yes, Lord; yet the dogs under the table eat of the children’s crumbs.

Are you of Jewish or of gentile stock? If from the latter, do you consider yourself as a dog taking crumbs from under the children’s table? Would you pass the test in Tyre? Many who have no claim to a holy heritage (Jn. 4:22) have taken on airs. We should not. We have capitalized on Israel’s misfortune. It was in their rejection of the Saviour that we are welcomed to salvation. “He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But to as many as received him, to them gave he the authority to become the children of God.” It was after bloody stones lay tribute to animosity and hatred in the street that those streets would become the road for Missionaries taking the gospel to the world. “And when the blood of they martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him. And he said unto me, Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles” Acts 22:20-21.

In the eyes of the Jew there was only one thing worse than being a gentile, and that was being a traitor and becoming their lackey. The tax-collector was the lowest of the low. Even the leper might have more pity than was afforded a turncoat. Every war has its Tories and its collaborators. These were the Judas’ of Judaism. The same contempt we have for the man who sold Jesus to his enemies was the feeling the Hebrew had of a Matthew or a Zacchaeus. A man bought the right of license to collect taxes for the Romans. A chief publican hired others to work as his agents and so a system of bureaucracy created a sea of resentment and bitterness. Those who collected the quota for Caesar were paid by their own diligence in the art of intimidation and extortion. The power to tax is the power to destroy. The publicans were feared as much as hated. That Jesus would even talk with them was incredible to the pious. And eating with Zacchaeus must have left them speechless. Making matters worse, there were certain ones who used the occupation for their advantage and became collaborators, for the Romans just as many turned on fellow prisoners in the concentration camps of Poland, and Hungary during the holocaust.

The Gentiles were the vast sea of humanity outside the covenant between God and Abraham. While God chose to work out his plan of redemption through Isaac, it was always the will of God to save unto the uttermost all that come unto him by Christ Jesus. Some of the Gentiles were attracted by needs and circumstances of life into kingdom of God. Some gentiles read and believed the scriptures like the Ethiopian eunuch while riding in a chariot, others listened to the words of the prophets like Naman the Syrian who rose out of the corruption of his leprosy and came to faith. Other gentiles came like wise men to the cradle and others stood broken hearted at the cross. Jew or gentile everyone must come to God one at a time. We cannot come in crowds or in groups. Whatever the pedigree of our birth we must be born again.

Once a man enters into God’s family by faith and begins to understand the nature of his once lost condition and the graciousness of God’s grace he will not attempt to erect platforms, courts, or special places for the spiritually elite. He will not attempt to divide the church up into tribes, divisions,

or denominations for Christ cannot be so divided; and when we enter the kingdom there is but one king.

It was at Babel that man was confounded and fractured into many nations. That confusion prevailed for four thousand years until faith in Christ made all one, out of every kindred and tongue, and people and nation, and all these sing a new song “worthy is the Lamb that was slain.”

Conclusion

The world has not changed much since the days of Jesus. It is still filled with Pharisees and Sadducees. There is an ever ongoing struggle of politics swirling around us. Man is still a political, intellectual and moral being who has lost his way. Christ’s coming into this world brings it meaning as well as hope and salvation. Nations have come and gone. Christ remains.

There is a world to come. It is the hope of the believer when God shall make things right and all things new. But there is more. There is a world within, a world where Jesus lives and reigns today. It is not in the heavens, but in the heart. It is there where Jesus still walks and works. It is the place where Jesus still wants to perform his miracles. It is in this inner world that faith fills the air and his word still rings with authority and power. Jesus is the light of this world as its only sun, and it is the mission of each who has come into the gravitational orbit of his grace that others discover this joy of being in harmony with He who made the planets and “so loved the world” that he came.

Like the holy land, each life has its highlands and lowlands. Each has its joyful places where water bubbles up out of the earth. Each too, can have its dead seas that are bottled up places that need to find outlets. Each life has its bustling market place as well as its quiet secret place where we must get alone with God. God made the earth in six days during creation. The new creation is ongoing. Let Jesus be born into your heart. Let Jesus be Lord of your life.