



Graceful Influence

*Making a
Lasting Impact through
Lessons from
Women of the Bible*

Lori Stanley Roeleveld

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**Our Daily Bread
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To all the Bible study-goers—
the women (and men) so hungry for God's Word
you read it even when no one is looking. You are
not hidden. His eyes are on you always.

Martha, Mary, and This Book

She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

John 11:27

We owe Martha an apology.

All of us who have judged her by a single moment, just one exchange in her relationship with Jesus, need to step back and remember that Martha was a woman loved by God. She was created to know and enjoy Him, not to be an object lesson in a thousand sermons, not to become a byword for busyness. Especially not when, too often, we withhold the rest of Martha’s story.

Martha and her sister, Mary, welcomed Jesus and the disciples into their home. While Martha busied herself with all the details of serving, driving herself to distraction, Mary sat listening to Jesus speak.

Clearly annoyed, Martha asked Jesus if He even cared that Mary had left her alone to serve. She asked Him to tell her sister to help. “But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken from her’” (Luke 10:41–42).

From this single moment, people have done a lot of preaching

about the importance of not “being a Martha.” The problem is that Jesus didn’t tell Martha to stop being Martha, and He didn’t say, “Mary’s a better person than you are.” Jesus invited Martha to look at the choice Mary made, the better one, and to do the same. He didn’t condemn Martha; He invited her to focus on Him, not on the busyness ratcheting up her anxiety.

Yes, depending on how it’s read, it *can* sound as if Jesus scolded Martha, but what if He did? Jesus once scolded Peter—“he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man’” (Mark 8:33).

Now, that’s a scolding. That’s a rebuke. But I’ve never seen a Bible study or heard a sermon titled “Be a John, Don’t Be a Peter.” Peter went on to make even worse decisions than the one that earned him that rebuke, but after His resurrection, Jesus asked Peter to feed His sheep.

Peter changed. He matured in faith. So did Martha.

We see this when Lazarus died. The sisters had sent for Jesus when Lazarus fell sick, but He didn’t come immediately. When He did arrive, Martha left her home (and, presumed, all the tasks of a mourning household) to meet Him.

She expressed her faith in Him even at this time of loss and received not only Jesus’s assurance that her brother would rise again but the revelation that Jesus is life. “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25–26).

That’s the important question. That’s *the* life-changing choice. Do you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? Will you follow Him? Whether you start paying attention to Him immediately, like Mary did, or it takes you a little more time, like it did Martha, what matters is that you do enter into a relationship with Him and allow that relationship to inform your life.

Jesus loved Martha, and He loves you. This love leads us to

want to live in ways that lead toward Him, not away. The Bible is our resource for learning how to take and remain on that wise path, but it's a process. When we follow Jesus, it is *He*—not our sins—who defines us.

The Bible is full of sinners who need Jesus. We try to make them into heroes and saints, but the Word resists that urge. The Holy Spirit inspired the biblical writers to record the sins and weaknesses of most people in Scripture right along with their triumphs. They were imperfect people following a great God, just as we are.

It's not our job to categorize those who came before us. Jezebel isn't a villain and Ruth isn't a saint. Like us, they were sinners surrounded by other sinners making choices in a sinful world. We may struggle to relate to their culture or their situations, but they were people like us.

And clearly, we need Jesus's direction in our decisions. Martha's behavior seems logical on the surface. Many behaviors make sense to us by worldly measures. Without Jesus, we wouldn't see that Mary's choice was toward Jesus while Martha's drew her from Him. Naomi's bitterness (Ruth 1:20) at the loss of her husband and sons is understandable, but it was drawing her away from God, whereas Ruth's mindset in loss drew her toward God. We need the Holy Spirit to help us see the better way.

Women of the Bible lived flesh-and-blood lives of hard work and heartache. Longings and laughter. Fear and faith. Struggles and successes. They existed in a place and time. Consider the women in your life. Each is unique and yet so like the others. Each has her share of pain and a measure of joy. Each is fearfully and wonderfully made. We would never imagine that any of them were created solely to serve as an illustration for the rest of us.

The Bible gives us just a snapshot of people's lives. We gain insight from their stories and their relationships with God, just as we learn from one another. But we must not flatten them

into one-dimensional figures or pit them against one another, as people so often have done with Mary and Martha. Martha wasn't less loved by Jesus when she chose poorly, any more than she was more loved by Jesus when she chose well. Neither are we (Romans 8:38–39).

Just as Jesus directed Martha to learn from Mary, we can observe people in the Bible, note the consequences of their actions, and learn. As we look at these women, we'll stay close to the biblical narrative, which is often spare of details. There will be times when we'll use what we know of human nature to cautiously speculate, but God has given us what we need to know. Often, we can learn more than one lesson from their stories. For the sake of this book, I've focused on just one lesson from each woman.

Remember that, like these women, you too are an influencer. We don't always feel influential, but the truth is that ordinary decisions we make will, over time, impact others directly and indirectly. From wearing an "I Voted" sticker to ordering desert because our friends do, from spreading infectious laughter and contagious yawns to passing on everything from germs to recycling habits, we influence others all the time.

Our choices matter. Our actions have ripple effects, sometimes for generations. We don't have to be powerful leaders, eloquent spokespeople, or recognized personalities to leave legacies. The graceful influence of an ordinary life marked by wise, godly decisions emits light that diminishes the world's darkness.

All Christians have sins from which we've repented and turned. As the saying goes, Jesus followers aren't perfect; we're forgiven and redeemed. We all need Jesus. We all need grace, but we also can exercise graceful influence.

This book isn't intended to be an exhaustive compendium of all the women mentioned in Scripture. You'll find mention of over 120 women, although one or two of your favorites may not be featured (Jephthah, for instance, from Judges, Naaman's wife's servant girl in 2 Kings, and Lois and Eunice in 2 Timothy).

You'll also note that all the choices, even those with negative effect, are presented in context. We live and act in a broken world surrounded by other broken people and cultures. For example, Sarah sent Hagar to Abraham (Genesis 16) to bear a child. That act continues to affect us even now. But Hebrews 11:11 commends Sarah's faith despite her troubled relationships, despite confusion about how God would work, despite her failings.

We live by faith, not by our own righteousness. We are to put no confidence "in the flesh" but in Jesus Christ, "and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Philippians 3:9). Our confidence is not in the perfection of our lives but in the work of Jesus in us and through us. That is the spirit in which we will explore all actions taken by the women in this book (and yours as well).

There are attitudes that lead toward God and attitudes that lead away from Him. With the power of the Holy Spirit in Christ, we are free to make godly decisions, but we don't always. That's not an excuse, but it is the truth of making our way in a world still marked by sin and death. So we'll exercise compassion.

As we consider these women, if we pay close attention, we'll see God at work in their lives. We'll see His love and mercy for them, and we'll see hope for ourselves in Christ. If we have a relationship with Jesus, He is the final word on all the rest of our decisions. If we haven't chosen a relationship with Him, we're dismissing the choice that makes all the difference, the one that leads to eternal life.

God included a variety of stories of women in the Bible. We can see ourselves in their struggles to know and obey God. We will see ourselves in their challenges, tragedies, and triumphs. They mattered. So do we. British theologian G. K. Chesterton wrote in his Father Brown series: "All men matter. You matter. I matter. It's the hardest thing in theology to believe."¹

You see, our greatest problem isn't that we don't matter; it's that we do. It isn't that we aren't significant but that our significance is hidden from us by the enemy of God, by life, and by our own doubts.

No matter how small we may feel our lives are or how limited we view our reach, our actions touch and ripple through other lives. We make a difference. We should worry less about the size of our reach and focus more on ensuring our effect is for God's glory.

We influence others because that's how God designed life to work. The only real question is whether our actions will lead toward God or away, will be harmful or graceful. In Christ, the final word on our impact can be unimaginably glorious. Let's listen carefully to some of the women recorded in His Word and let their voices and choices influence ours.



The Woman Devoted to Jesus

The Impact of Love

*Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is
proclaimed in the whole world, what she has
done will also be told in memory of her.*

Matthew 26:13

Simon was hosting a dinner, and Jesus and His disciples were present with him there in Bethany. It was just before Passover, and soon swelling crowds would congest the streets of nearby Jerusalem. The room buzzed with guests reclining at the table. People of fine reputation served the meal. Everyone's focus was on the honored guest, the rabbi from Galilee.

One woman walked past them all, guests and servers, her attention entirely on Jesus. When she reached Him, she broke open an alabaster flask of costly, pure nard.

Nard (or spikenard) is an oil derived from a plant in the honeysuckle family. It's amber colored, with a musky, woody scent. The contents of this woman's flask were aromatic and of great

worth, the equivalent of almost a year's wages, perhaps representing her dowry or her life's savings.

Nard is mentioned in the Song of Solomon. The bride says, "While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance" (Song of Solomon 1:12). Pretty romantic imagery.

Later, the bridegroom lavishly describes the scents of nard and saffron which emanated from his bride (Song of Solomon 4:11–14).

The love this woman demonstrated at Simon's feast was a costly risk, economically and socially, but she concentrated on the only One in the room who mattered to her. Jesus who forgives sins. Jesus who heals diseases. Jesus who announces the kingdom of God. She probably wasn't trying to be significant but was simply expressing her devotion to Jesus.

This was a wildly intimate moment that created discomfort in Simon and the guests as she anointed Jesus's head with oil. It's fair to imagine they were familiar with the poetry of Solomon's love story. Did the references spring to mind, increasing their unease?

The disciples challenged the woman. "Why this waste?" (Matthew 26:8). These men appreciated the value of the oil. They knew of Jesus's love for the disadvantaged, so they scolded her. "This could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor" (v. 9).

Jesus scolded them back. Of course, care for the poor. Care for the poor whenever you like. They will always be with you. But, He explained, He would not always be with them. This woman had, in her devotion, anointed Him for His burial. "Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her" (v. 13).

Her demonstration of love not only ministered to Jesus but also unintentionally exposed the hearts of others. She didn't preach a sermon. She simply acted on her love without concern about who was watching, and her love became a searchlight that revealed the shadows lurking in their hearts.

Her choice to publicly express her love for Jesus without shame

or self-concern remains a beacon for us, shining across cultures and years. This woman showed us that the path to a lasting impact for Jesus begins with single-minded attention to and love for Him.



The actual reach of our witness is, like hers, often hidden from our sight. For while some are called to global ministries, many more of us are called to a more local influence. Like the Israelites rebuilding Jerusalem's wall in Nehemiah's day, we too are asked to guard and build our own small section of the "gospel wall" in God's kingdom. We are divinely appointed to humble days, small scopes, and the mystery of God at work in the ordinary.

In God's kingdom, it's not only those who accomplish "great things" that have a powerful influence for Christ. It is also those who contribute their widow's mite of devotion, who open their single alabaster jar out of love for Jesus, teaching children, visiting the lonely, building sets for Christmas plays, planting trees, or generously supporting ministries to people they may never meet on earth.



What we see about having a graceful influence from the woman with the alabaster jar is fourfold.

First, graceful influence begins with forgetting ourselves and focusing on Jesus. The devoted woman risked the disapproval and rejection of those gathered to demonstrate her love for Jesus.

Second, influence for God isn't limited by gender. From the opening of Scripture to the close, God demonstrates that men and women have equal opportunity. Both can sin in ways that have lasting negative effects. And both have equal opportunity for redemption in Christ and inclusion in the work of proclaiming His kingdom until He comes. The Holy Spirit is the power



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behind our lives, and He is not limited by anything about us—not our ethnicity, economic status, appearance, gender, worldly status, or age.

Third, graceful influence involves doing what we *can* do for Him, not what we can't. This woman offered Jesus what she had. She probably wasn't trying to do something that would become a story told to every generation to come. She just expressed love the way she knew how to express it, pouring out what she valued most onto the One she valued above all. We all have unique gifts and ways of expressing ourselves. This variety was God's design so we can lean into Him in love.

Finally, it's God who determines the scope of our influence. No one in that room appeared terribly impressed with what this woman had done. In fact, because her giving illuminated the selfishness of their lives, they probably wished she'd kept her gift to herself. I'm guessing they didn't want this story recorded.

Jesus is the one who determined this would be a story told through the generations. He is also the one who determines the impact of our lives, our stories. When Jesus is central, our ministry can be as far-reaching as a powerful fragrance released from its broken container.

We are, after all, the aroma of Christ. “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Corinthians 2:14–16).

In life, as in that room, our love poured out for Jesus will be a sweet aroma to those open to Jesus's love, but an unpleasant odor to those resisting the repentance to which He calls us. As our lives, out of love for Jesus, are broken and poured out for Him, we become the precious nard that is the aroma of Christ.

The lasting effect of this aroma will be life for all who are being saved.

BIBLE

This woman's story is told in Matthew 26:6–13 and Mark 14:3–9. There are two other stories of Jesus being anointed with oil by a woman. These are found in Luke 7:36–50 and John 12:1–8. What are your thoughts on why there is a similar story told in each of the four gospels? How are they alike? What differences do you see?

Jesus told His followers that loving God and loving others are the greatest commandments (Mark 12:29–31). In what ways do you love God “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (v. 30)?

Bible Extra

Read Psalm 23 and consider what significance it may have held for Jesus as His head was anointed with oil in the presence of Judas. Consider how a scent lingers. How powerful is it to imagine that a simple decision you make can linger with others and continue influencing them long after you've left their company.

BATTLE

Not everyone who came to hear Jesus (either in these stories or in other gospel stories) was interested in Him because they loved Him. The woman with the alabaster jar appeared to love Him, but others came to hear Jesus for a variety of reasons. Some hoped He would lead His people to overthrow Rome and save them from oppression (John 6:15). Others wanted to be fed (John 6:26). Some came to argue or scrutinize because He was challenging the current order of their society (Matthew 21:15). Still others probably had not made up their minds about who

Jesus was and what they wanted from Him (Matthew 16:13–16). This is still our battle today.

Have we come to Jesus for Jesus? Do we recognize Him as God and long to focus attention on Him? Or are we there for what we get out of being associated with Him, hoping He'll enrich or empower us?

What made the difference between being the woman with graceful influence through her love versus being one of those scolded by Jesus? How easy is it to behave more like the people reacting indignantly to the woman than like the woman herself? What steps can we take to keep our focus and attention on Jesus? Consider Hebrews 12:1–3 in forming your answer.



Bottom Line

When Jesus is our focus, our ministry can be like a fragrance released from its jar that can no longer be contained.



You Make a Difference

Most of us feel overwhelmingly average. We doubt if we can make a real impact on our loved ones, workplace, or community. But the women of Scripture tell a different story. They prove that you can make a lasting difference!

Lori Stanley Roeleveld points out the God-given power of your influence. In each chapter, you'll examine the lives of two women from the Bible and discover how their contrasting choices allowed them to influence future generations. The relevance of their struggles will shed light on the challenges you face in making similar choices.

Whether you are a newcomer or a longtime reader of Scripture, reading as an individual or with a small group, you will be encouraged and challenged by Lori's biblical insight and compassionate wisdom. In these 28 short chapters, the Bible's age-old stories will speak to your heart with a fresh, authentic voice.

Lori Stanley Roeleveld is a professional coach, author, speaker, and disturber of hobbits. She harnesses the power of God's Word to revive the hearts of weary believers. Lori loves Jesus, her family, and small churches. Degreed in psychology and biblical studies, she learned the most from studying her Bible in life's trenches. Find the heart to press on at www.loriroeleveld.com.

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