

LIFE IN BIBLE TIMES

Lesson 4

Marriage, family, knowing your place and body

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Introduction

Families were the heartbeat of the ancient world, with gender roles deeply woven into daily life. Even objects carried gender associations: kitchen tools and goats were considered feminine, while farming equipment and sheep were masculine. Homes and inner courtyards were female domains, while animals like sheep belonged to male territory—out in the fields. This shaped where genders spent their time: women managed the household, preparing food and caring for children, while men worked outside or represented their families in public. As boys grew, they spent more time outside learning men's roles, while girls remained indoors, training in domestic responsibilities.

Marriage

Couples married young in ancient times. Girls were typically engaged at 12–13 and wed a year later, while boys were 16–18. Caesar Augustus even passed a law preventing Roman girls from marrying before age 12!

All marriages were pre-arranged by parents, with children having no say. Love often developed later, as the primary goal was procreation. Childlessness was a serious issue; if a woman bore no children within 10 years, a man could divorce her. Divorce was also permitted for adultery, though some liberal rabbis allowed it for minor issues, like a wife burning food.

Jesus transformed these customs, emphasizing loving, harmonious relationships. He highlighted the lifelong bond God ordains in marriage and cautioned against easy justifications for divorce (**Mark 10:1-12, Ephesians 5:31**). Notably, women could follow Jesus through Galilee (**Luke 8:1-3; 10:38-42**), signaling a shift in roles.

Women were expected to respect their husbands (**Ephesians 5:22-24, 1 Peter 3:6-7**), but this came with the expectation of honorable husbands and fathers who respected their families, working daily to build and protect their honor. Notice how mutual respect, sacrificial love, and service underpin **Ephesians 5:21-33**.

Redefining Roles

In ancient times, a firstborn son held the daunting right to restore family honor by pursuing and even killing a sister who eloped before marriage—an act celebrated as honorable. Disobedient sons could face death for persistent rebellion against parents (**Deuteronomy 21:18-21**). Obedience to parents was heavily emphasized, both in the Old Testament and New Testament (**Ephesians 6:1-4, Colossians 3:20**).

Unlike Romans, who might abandon children on trash heaps, Jewish families valued their children, involving them in baptisms, teachings, meals, and worship (**Acts 16:33-34, 1 Corinthians 1:16**).

Jesus brought children into the spotlight. He healed a Canaanite woman's daughter (**Matthew 15:21-28**) and a man's struggling son (**Matthew 17:14-18**). Women brought their children to Jesus, and He blessed them publicly (**Mark 10:13-16**).

Most strikingly, Jesus redefined greatness in God's Kingdom by using a child to illustrate heavenly importance (**Matthew 18:1-5**). No longer was status tied to gender, social rank, or age—servanthood and humility became the measure of greatness!

Choosing well

As we've discussed, making correct choices in public added to one's honor, while mistakes brought shame—something everyone sought to avoid. Admitting errors or weaknesses was a last resort. Groups could discipline members harshly for neglecting norms.

This made people in Jesus' time hesitant to take initiative. To avoid mistakes, they often acted passively, deferring decisions to the group. We see this in Pilate letting the crowd decide Jesus' fate (**Mark 15:6-15**). This reluctance also made it incredibly difficult to leave one's group to follow Jesus and join the church, especially if family members didn't follow, causing dishonor (**Matthew 10:35-37**). This explains why apostles often shared their faith with family leaders first (**Acts 16:31-34**), easing the way for others to follow.

Within Christian groups, doing the right thing was expected, but a new element emerged: believers were encouraged to admit mistakes and weaknesses, trusting their Mediator to maintain their relationship with God, their “Benefactor”. Paul openly shared his struggles, failures, and suffering (**2 Corinthians 6 and chapters 11–13**). Following Jesus’ redefinition of roles, servanthood and humility were emphasized. Acknowledging weakness became a way to honor God, who displays His power through our weakness (**2 Corinthians 12:8-10**), just as He did through the weakness of the cross (**2 Corinthians 13:4**).

Believers thus viewed each other’s weaknesses differently, offering support rather than stripping honor (**Romans 12:9-21**).

Your Body, your Home

In ancient society, the body was seen as a home with rooms, its openings needing careful guarding. Adultery or contact with impure people risked allowing evil spirits to enter through “bodily gates.” People avoided places where evil spirits dwelt, like deserts, certain waters (e.g., the sea, deep or stagnant pools, or the Dead Sea), or animals like wolves (nocturnal howling, attacking sheep), snakes, or dogs (scavenging garbage or corpses). See **Ezekiel 22:27 and Zephaniah 3:3** on wolves, and **Proverbs 26:11 and 2 Kings 9:36** on dogs. Jesus warned of false prophets as “wolves in sheep’s clothing” (**Matthew 7:15**; see also **Matthew 15:26, Revelation 22:15**).

Water, especially chaotic or storm-tossed, was linked to evil spirits. Jesus’ walking on water (**Matthew 14:22-33**), calming storms (**Mark 4:35-41**), and casting demons into the sea (**Mark 5:1-13**) demonstrated His authority over evil.

To protect themselves, people wore amulets (e.g., the “Evil Eye”) or used hand gestures. Exorcists might recite names of gods to intimidate spirits (**Acts 19:13-16**). Jesus’ teaching in **Luke 11:24-26** illustrates how spirits could inhabit “empty homes.”

Yet Jesus proved stronger than any spirit through exorcisms (**Mark 1:23-27; 5:1-13; 9:17-29**), defeating the devil (**Luke 11:21-22, Colossians 2:15, Revelation 12**). He claimed full control over our bodies as temples (**1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:18-20; 2 Corinthians 2:14-17; 6:14–7:1**). Once filled with the Holy Spirit, no evil spirit can dwell within. This protection, however, didn’t extend to unbelieving outsiders (**Acts 16:18; 19:12**).

Indispensable

Benefactors gave generously to clients to keep their names celebrated publicly. Religious leaders shared spiritual knowledge or visions to prove divine connection, gaining honor if predictions came true. High-status benefactors could employ lower-status individuals to share such visions, as their positions were unthreatened.

Each person had a role to fulfill, and actions reflected their group identity. If a group leader performed exorcisms, disciples were expected to do the same. When Jesus' disciples failed to free a demon-possessed child (**Mark 9:14-29**), it reflected poorly on them until Jesus intervened, restoring honor.

Imagine the public shame when Jesus, who claimed to give life and raised others, died on the cross—a moment religious leaders mocked (**Matthew 27:39-44**).

Paul's body analogy in **1 Corinthians 12** speaks to this ancient worldview. Each member's role was vital; a body part failing its function left an irreplaceable void, harming the whole (the church's effectiveness). In a culture of limited goods, every role mattered.

This contrasts with our modern view, where people and goods are often seen as replaceable, hurting marriages, families, communities, and the church.
