

JESUS THE EVANGELIST

John 4:1-10

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Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (Jn. 4:10).

It would be hard to find a more interesting array of individuals than those presented in the Gospel of John. We have most of the famous figures from the Gospels: Jesus, the twelve disciples, Mary, and John the Baptist. But ordinary people also stroll through John, and in them we see many of the fascinating details of human life. They are all different, but they are also very much the same. Through them, John proves to us that the gospel is for everyone. Jesus came to save not a certain class or type of persons, but all kinds of people, each of whom must only receive him in faith.

It is particularly interesting to compare and contrast Nicodemus, featured in John 3, with the woman at the well in John 4. Nicodemus was a man at the top of life, admired by almost everyone, but one who needed to be born again. But, lest we should think that only the proud need salvation, we are next introduced to someone at the other end of life. Here is an immoral woman who had to fetch water from the well in the heat of the day, when the other women were gone, because of her bad reputation. James Boice comments on this:

It is difficult to imagine a greater contrast between two persons than the contrast between the important and sophisticated Nicodemus, this ruler of the Jews, and the simple Samaritan woman. He was a Jew; she a Samaritan. He was a Pharisee; she belonged to no religious party. He was a politician; she had no status whatever. He was a scholar; she was uneducated. He was highly moral; she was immoral. He had a name; she is nameless. He was a man; she was a woman. He came at night, to

protect his reputation; she, who had not reputation, came at noon. Nicodemus came seeking; the woman was sought by Jesus.

A great contrast. Yet the point of the stories is that both the man and the woman needed the gospel and were welcome to it. If Nicodemus is an example of the truth that no one can rise so high as to be above salvation, the woman is an example of the truth that none can sink too low.¹

John placed these two figures side by side to show that the gospel is for everyone. Because of unbelief, not everyone in the world *is* saved. But the glory of the gospel is that everyone – regardless of sex, race, education, wealth or social position – *may be* saved through faith in Jesus Christ.

CARING FOR THE LOST

If it glorifies Jesus that he makes salvation possible for everyone, it glorifies him even more that he actually saves particular individuals. Christian salvation is universal in its offer but particular in its application. A great example of this comes in John 4, when Jesus went out of his way to bring his gospel to the woman at the well and through her to her entire village. Here, we see Jesus the evangelist, bringing the gospel to those whom he would save.

John chapter 4 contains a number of famous statements, but the most glorious may be the one found in verse 4. The chapter begins by telling us that Jesus started gathering followers, who were baptized by the twelve disciples, and then he “left Judea and departed again for Gali-lee” (Jn. 4:3). John then says: “And he had to pass through Samaria” (Jn. 4:4). What makes this so wonderful is the way in which it was *not* true. Geographically, Jesus did not have to pass through Samaria and for many reasons it was inconvenient for him to do so. But John informs us that Jesus “had to” go this way: it was necessary for him. The reason is his determination to save his own, among whom were this woman by the well. Donald Grey Barnhouse compares this to a soldier who returns from overseas and travels from San Francisco to his home in Philadelphia. Along the way he *has* to stop in Miami. Why is such a detour needed? He answers, “Because my fiancée lives there!” Likewise, Jesus was compelled to go

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 1:272.

through Samaria because of love. In this passage, we are going to examine the features of Jesus' evangelistic approach, beginning with his loving *care for the lost*.

Serving the gospel is always hard work, and so it was for Jesus. Such was his care for others that he wearied himself bringing the gospel to them. Likewise, if we care for others' salvation we will expend ourselves in ministry to them – in prayer, in service, and in witness. Jesus traveled a long road through Samaria. When he arrived at the town of Sychar, John tells us, “Jacob’s well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well” (Jn. 4:6). If we are not willing to be wearied – if we do not find ourselves sometimes needing a rest from our labors – then we are not likely to accomplish much in Christian ministry.

The apostle John wrote this Gospel in part to persuade us of Jesus' deity. But scenes like this also display Jesus' full humanity. As Son of God, he was completely self-sufficient. But as a man, Jesus tired and grew thirsty. He needed rest and something to drink. When you pray about the weariness of life and the hardships you endure, Jesus knows personally what you mean, because he has been weary, too.

Many of us are not effective evangelists simply because we are too lazy and self-centered. We are not willing to cross the street to meet people. We do not care enough for the eternal destiny of friends, family members, and co-workers to risk the social hazard of talking about the Lord. Our lives are focused on our own needs and those of our children, so we have no time to participate in outreach ministries. For many of us, the first step in evangelism is simply to care enough for the lost to become weary in the gospel. Those who do tire themselves in gospel outreach have sweet fellowship with the Savior who rested on the well.

One way to motivate yourself to care for others is to realize how much Jesus sacrificed to care for your own soul. We see his concern for particular individuals in his journey through Samaria. Had Jesus merely wanted to open a way for salvation for whomever would come, he need never have gone to Samaria. What he was soon to do in Jerusalem was sufficient to make a way to God – namely, his death on the cross for our sins. Jesus did not have to go to Samaria for this. But Jesus died not only generally for all who would come, but

actually to save by his gospel particular people known to him, including the woman he knew was coming to draw water from this well.

If you are a believer, the same is true of you. Just as Jesus personally brought the gospel to the Samaritan woman, so also he personally sought you for salvation. If you have heard the gospel and believed, it was not by chance! Jesus cared for *your* soul, he died on the cross for *your* sins, he sent his witnesses to *you*, and he commissioned the Holy Spirit to open *your* heart to believe. “You did not choose me, but I chose you,” he said (Jn. 15:16). Realizing his loving concern for your soul ought to inspire you to care for the salvation of people you know.

CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES

Evangelism requires a caring motivation. The next step in sharing the gospel will often be to *cross the boundaries* that separate people from God. This Samaritan woman would never come to Jerusalem, where Jesus had been preaching and working miracles: she knew she would not fit in among the Jews. So Jesus crossed the boundaries and went to her. John tells us:

There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?’ (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)” John 4:7-9.

In just these few verses, Jesus crossed three barriers. The first was that which separated Samaritans from Jews. In the 8th century B.C., the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and deported the Israelites who lived there. In their place they brought other peoples to populate the land (see 2 Kings 17:24). These Gentiles sought to worship both the gods of their homelands and the local god of the Israelites, so they mixed the religions. This was a grave offense to the Jews, and over the centuries their hatred only grew as the Samaritans developed their own brand of Judaism. Because of this, most Jews traveling between Jerusalem and Galilee went the long way around Samaria, and they carefully avoided personal contact with Samaritan people. Rabbi Eliezer taught, “He

that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like to one that eats the flesh of swine.”² So the first barrier Jesus crossed was a barrier of ethnic and cultural hatred.

This Samaritan was also a woman. It may not seem scandalous to us for a man to sit at a well with a woman, but it certainly was in Jesus’ day. Religious Jewish men used to thank God daily not merely that they had not been born Samaritans, but they also prayed, “Blessed art thou, O Lord... who hast not made me a woman.” A rabbi would lose his reputation if he spoke publicly to any woman, even his own wife or daughter. Yet, Jesus unashamedly crossed that gender barrier.

Third, Jesus crossed a religious taboo by asking for a drink. Jews did not share utensils with Samaritans; doing so risked separation from the fellowship and worship of God’s people by breaking the man-made temple rules. Yet Jesus deliberately crossed that line, too. Even the woman was astonished by this, asking, “How is that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (v. 9).

Why did Jesus cross these barriers? Because he cared for her soul. We, too, have to cross barriers to reach people for Christ. This does not mean that we should participate in sin – Jesus never did that. But it does mean that we have to reach out to people who will never come to church or read the Bible. This woman did not belong in the religious world that produced Jesus. So he came into her world with the gospel. He crossed ethnic and gender and religious lines to seek her out. William Barclay exclaims, “Here is God so loving the world, not in theory, but in action.”³ We must do the same on his behalf.

In John 3, Jesus gave us a negative explanation for unbelief: he said that people loved darkness and hated light (Jn. 3:19), so they have no interest in Christ. But more of the story is shown in John 4. Many people are kept from God simply because they think they don’t belong in the church. They assume that believers look down on them and they feel uncomfortable in religious surroundings, the way a Samaritan would have felt in Jerusalem. Since they are not likely to come to us, we have to take the gospel to them.

² Cited from Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John*, 126.

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), I:151.

When I think back to the circumstances that brought me to Christ I realize how unlikely it was, humanly speaking. Though I was raised in a moral and religious home, I did not have biblical beliefs. I was really a secular humanist. The truths taught by the Bible were contemptible to me. The lives led by Christians held little appeal to my heart. I would not, on my own, have crossed the threshold of the church to meet with Jesus Christ. So Jesus crossed the threshold to me and sat down upon the well of my heart. He created a thirst for truth and meaning. He sent witnesses to cross my path. When I first responded to the gospel, he sent authentic Christians to befriend and encourage me. Jesus crossed the boundaries I would never have crossed; when I would not have come into his world, he came into my world and drew me to himself. If you are hearing me preach his gospel right now, it is likely because Jesus is sitting at the well waiting for you as he did for me and for that Samaritan woman long ago.

CONNECTING WITH PEOPLE

So far, what Jesus had done merely brought him into contact with this woman. Their relationship began when she arrived at the well: “There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’” (Jn. 4:7).

In relating to her, Jesus gives a model to us. We find out in this chapter that she was a sinful person who held all kinds of false beliefs, the way that people do today. Jesus nonetheless did not treat her as a pariah, but as a person. He *connected with her* on a personal level. He started with a request, and that request sparked a connection. We might think that he would open the encounter with a display of miraculous power to awe her – perhaps making the water flow up the well to fill his cup. Or Jesus might have rebuked her for the mess that her life undoubtedly was. But Jesus thought it wiser to humble himself in his true humanity and give her an opportunity to minister to his need.

Many Christians today are walled off from the world the way the Jews of Jesus’ time were. Like the Jews bypassing Samaria, we do not travel through the world but only within the ghetto of our own sub-culture. If we interact with worldly people we certainly don’t

think they have anything to offer us. Small wonder, then, that they are not open to what we have to offer them. Jesus was not like that: he walked through the world and treated even scandalous Samaritan women as persons of worth, capable of giving him something of value. As Frederick Godet wisely notes, “He is not unaware that the way to gain a soul is often to ask a service of it.”⁴

Vastly superior as Jesus was to this woman, he placed himself in her care. By exposing her to his need, he opened the door to a relationship in which meaningful content could be exchanged. Along these lines, Christians today hinder our witness if we cultivate a façade that masks our weakness, struggles, and needs. There are skills we lack which our neighbors can offer and matters on which we can turn to them for advice. We should not hide our anxiety, fear, and grief from non-Christians. Being Christian does not make us less human – but more human – and we can connect with people by living authentically in all our weakness, displaying Christ’s power through our faith. The Lord Almighty did not hide his weariness from the Samaritan woman; he who offered living water was not ashamed to say, “Give me a drink.” J. C. Ryle comments, “Simple as this request may seem, it opened a door to spiritual conversation. It threw a bridge across the gulf which lay between her and Him. It led to the conversion of her soul.”⁵

Given his divine omniscience, Jesus must have known this woman was coming and therefore have come specifically for her. He even seems to have waited in his thirst for her to come along and give him the pail. This reminds us that the doctrine of election is not deterrent to evangelism but a motivation: we know God has people around us to be saved, so we witness with confidence. And, like Jesus, we should have specific people on our hearts for whom we are praying and to whom we are seeking to share the gospel. Yet God in his sovereignty can send anyone to us at any time to hear about Jesus and be saved. Knowing this, we should look upon every encounter as a divine appointment and seek to make a connection through which we may talk about Jesus and the gospel.

⁴ Frederick Louis Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,), 1:422.

⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 1:203.

The woman at the well was so astonished by Jesus' approach to her, that she gave him an immediate opportunity to share the gospel: "The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?'" (Jn. 4:9). Likewise, unbelieving people who live next door to Christians, or who work alongside Christians, or whose family members are converted to Christian faith, ought to be compelled to ask us what makes us so different. They ought to observe a sincere godliness in our conduct, a graciousness in our speech, and a compassion and concern in our hearts – all of which are in such low supply today – so that they ask us to tell them what Christ has done in our lives.

COMMUNICATING GOOD NEWS

Relating and connecting with people has been called "pre-evangelism" because important as this is we have not actually evangelized until we tell people about the salvation God offers. Jesus followed up his opportunity by clearly and directly *communicating good news* to this woman: "Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water'" (Jn. 4:10).

We will study Jesus' description of salvation more carefully in our next study, but we should first make some observations about the way Jesus presented the gospel. First, he took the situation he was in and used it to point to spiritual realities. It was after feeding the five thousand with a few loaves that he spoke of himself as the Bread of Life. Here by the well, he makes the analogy between the thirst of the body and the thirst of the soul, so as to offer the living waters of eternal life.

We should seek to do the same: to relate all our life settings to the grace of God in the gospel. When I served as a combat commander in the Army, my mind was trained to always evaluate the terrain around me. Everywhere I went, even at a picnic or a drive in the country, I would ask myself where the attack lanes were and where defensive positions should be emplaced. We would be stronger evangelists if we did the same: in every situation, we should ask ourselves, "How does this relate to the gospel? If the Lord should give me an

opportunity to speak of his saving grace, how would this situation give me an opening?”

Second, note that Jesus pointedly spoke of the gift God offers. He began, “If you knew the gift of God,” and the point of evangelism is that people do not know it. People have no idea that God has something to give them. They little imagine – though their hearts yearn for it – that there is more to life than this work-a-day world and its unsatisfying recreations. It never occurs to them that God looks on them with care and grace to save if only they will ask. Most people look on God with the vague resentment this woman first cast towards Jesus: he is an authority to be resisted and a judge to be avoided. They do not know the gift of God; we have the privilege of telling them.

The heart of our gospel is good news about God’s free gift. Jesus communicates this same good news to you today through the Gospel of John. Jesus cares for your soul, so he came from heaven to earth to sit down at the well by your heart and meet personally with you. He came to offer you the greatest gift imaginable. God offers that Christ’s blood would wash away your sins so that you may stand righteous in his sight. He offers that his Holy Spirit would take up residence in your heart, light casting out darkness, truth evicting error, holiness subduing the cravings of sin. He offers you life beyond the grave, the resurrection body that Paul describes as “imperishable,” “glorious,” and “heavenly” (1 Cor. 15:42-49). But towering above all these inestimable gifts, God offers you the gift of himself. “I will be your God, and you will be my people,” he says. How terrible it would be for us to spurn God’s gift.

God created us with a thirst that only he can quench by the living waters Jesus offers through faith. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). And by inspiring us to care for the salvation of others, cross the boundaries and connect with people around us, God wants to communicate this same good news to all kinds of people in this world – people like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman and every other kind of person. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (Jn. 20:21).