

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part seventeen

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WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH - AND WHY THE FATHER SEEKS SUCH

John 4:15-42 - "The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water." [16] Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." [17] The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; [18] for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." [19] The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. [20] Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." [21] Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. [22] You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. [23] But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. [24] God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." [25] The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." [26] Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he." [27] Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you seek?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" [28] So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, [29] "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" [30] They went out of the town and were coming to him. [31] Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." [32] But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." [33] So the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought him something to eat?" [34] Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. [35] "Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. [36] Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. [37] For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' [38] I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." [39] Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." [40] So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. [41] And many more believed because of his word. [42] They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

It is interesting that the Apostle John places this story of the Samaritan woman immediately following Jesus' conversation with the learned religious leader of the Jews, Nicodemus. They are as different as night and day. Nicodemus is well placed in society. He is recognized everywhere he goes for good reasons. He is looked up to.

This nameless woman is second class by all cultural measurements. She is second, first of all, just by virtue of being a woman. Either she has been widowed five times (which certainly goes against the odds) or she has been divorced - virtually cast aside - *kicked out* - with no say in the matter. Men could divorce women. But a woman could never divorce a man. And she is hated because she is a Samaritan. And she is probably branded as one of *"those women"* - with a reputation of being an immoral adultress.

So, yes, these two - Nicodemus and this Samaritan woman - are as different at two people could possibly be. But they have one thing in common - one thing the Apostle John drives into our minds. They both desperately *need Jesus*. One is separated from Christ by pride and self-reliance. The other is separated from Christ by shame and humiliation.

And there is something else we're meant to notice. They are both in the dark about how spiritual life is to be found and received. John is showing us the different primary ways through which people reject eternal life in the Son. Though Jesus uses different terminology, His point is the same with each. There is a spiritual regeneration that is needed right at the core of their beings. Nicodemus needs to be *"born again"* (3:3). The Samaritan woman needs inward *"living water"* (4:10), and *"eternal life"* (4:13).

But there is something important to notice in Jesus' conversation with this thirsty woman. It starts off today's teaching:

1) **JESUS USES LAW IN PRESENTING GOSPEL**

John 4:15-19 - "The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water." 16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." 17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and

the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.” 19 The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.”

There are prominent Christian leaders today who question the appropriateness of exposing sin as sin in those whom they would draw to Christ. The idea is people already **know** their flaws and mistakes. They already feel the heavy weight of their own lives. What they will be drawn to is the unconditional love and beauty of Jesus, God the Son.

And this is precisely where these verses speak to us. Jesus has already filled this woman’s mind and heart with wonderful promises of life and grace. She had already heard news wildly beyond any of her expectations.

Imagine the hope inspired by the words of the two promises in **John 4:10 and 14** - **“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... 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”**

Then Jesus immediately tells the woman to go and get her husband - **knowing already that the man she is living with isn’t her husband** - **John 4:16** - **“Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come here.’”** Why go there? What is Jesus doing? Why doesn’t He just give this woman living water and eternal life?

Answer: because, in her present state she can’t **receive** eternal life. Why not? And now we’re asking the most important question we can ask about the entrance of living water into sinful people. Here’s the question. **Do sinful people have to clean up their own sin before they can receive God’s grace?** Do they somehow **qualify** first and get living water after? Is **that** what Jesus is doing with this Samaritan woman? Why does He bring up the whole **husband** thing?

And here’s the answer that **used** to be obvious in the church, but is miles from understood today. No. This woman doesn’t have to clean up her own life before she can be the deeply loved object of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. In fact, there is no way she **can** clean up her inward life on her own. In the memorable words of Jesus, first make the **tree** good and then the **fruit** will be good also. There is simply no way this woman can clean up her sinful life on her own. And Jesus isn’t **asking** her to do that.

We need to look closely at this because this point is broadly misunderstood in the church today. Let’s say she instantly decided to move out and break off the relationship with the man with whom she was living. True, that would break off the relationship and the piling up of **future** sin. But what about the **accumulated guilt** of all those past days, weeks, months, and years? I don’t just mean the guilt **feelings** she may have. I mean the actual stored up **guilt** - the **wrath-of-God-deserving-sin** that still stands, even if she broke off her present sinful relationship. Exactly how would she clean up **that** sin?

There was actually quite a load of theological truth in the old song we used to sing - **“What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”**

Now remember where we are. Jesus immediately tells this woman to go and get her husband, knowing she isn’t married to the man she is with. If He **doesn’t** do this to require her to clean up her own sin, **why** does He do this?

Because, while she **can’t** clean up her own sin, she does have to **admit** her sinfulness. Living water comes to people who want to be **cleansed from sin against God**. It doesn’t come to people who want moral advice and then continue with their own agenda.

That’s why Jesus administers the wise use of the law in drawing this woman into the loving embrace of the gospel. Jesus knows if this New Testament use of the law is left out, the gospel will never be appreciated **for its intended effect**. It will turn into moral advice and a tool for the propping up of self-esteem. It will do nothing more.

But as we follow the divine wisdom of Jesus we will learn the use of the **law** to **wisely afflict the comfortable** and the truth of the **gospel** to **lovingly comfort the afflicted**. That’s what we see Jesus doing in this wonderful encounter.

2) JESUS' WORDS ABOUT WORSHIPING IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH - AND HOW THEY'RE SO COMMONLY MISUNDERSTOOD

John 4:20-24 - "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Since their refusal to help rebuild the temple, Samaritans worshiped on Mount Gerizim rather than in Jerusalem, where Solomon had built the temple. The Jews, of course, insisted that true worship be offered in Jerusalem. And the sacrifices had to be offered in the proper place to be effective. This God had made clear to His people over and over in the Old Testament.

Then Jesus comes on the scene. He is a Jew and, in the mind of this woman, He is a prophet. And yet Jesus takes neither side in this debate. He doesn't identify Gerizim or Jerusalem as the official worship site.

And now we're ready to hear, to my mind, the greatest misuse of Jesus' spirit and truth remarks. Over and over again I've heard people say the point Jesus was making was the place of worship doesn't matter. It's like Jesus was simply saying they could worship anywhere they wanted now.

And I think that was nowhere near the cranium of Jesus when He made those remarks. Jesus wasn't trying to say we could worship anywhere we want. I believe what He was trying to say was ***no matter where we go we haven't a ghost of a chance of approaching God anyway.***

The meeting place with God has been ***redefined***. His realm is not Jerusalem or Gerizim. It's not as though we have access as long as we can reach some physical location. No. Jesus is saying we can't get to God on our own because we're ***material and sinful*** and God must be reached in a ***redemptive, holy, spiritual*** way.

Jesus, the Word made flesh, has changed everything. God must be reached in the place He has made Himself ***redemptively*** present. That's why religious Nicodemus, who knew everything about Jerusalem backward and forwards has to be born again. And that's why this Samaritan woman, who is wondering whether her ancestors or the Jews were picking the right location, needs to know that, with the coming of Jesus, it's not Gerizim or Jerusalem.

She needs to know ***to whom she is speaking right now*** - John 4:10 and 25-26 - "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.*** 25 The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." 26 Jesus said to her, ***'I who speak to you am he.'***"

This is the gospel answer to the world's religions. Even very good religions. Old points of worship ignorance have been made inexcusable with the revelation of Jesus Christ - Acts 17:30-31 - "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Neither Jerusalem nor Gerizim can open the door to a holy God. The seeking ***Father*** (notice that term in **21 and 23**) gives the Spirit of ***regeneration*** and ***adoption*** to sons and daughters who come through Jesus Christ. There is no possibility of worship apart from this bridge between the sinner and God.

3) THE JOY THAT COMES FROM LIVING FOR THE FATHER'S PLEASURE

John 4:27-34 - "Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you seek?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" 28 So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, 29 "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" 30 They went out of the town and were coming to him. 31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." 32 But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." 33 So the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought him something to eat?" 34 Jesus said to them, ***'My food is to do the will of him***

who sent me and to accomplish his work.”

This is not a passage against the value of good food. We know Jesus experienced hunger and we know He ate satisfying food. But is it possible, as this text seems to suggest, that there is a refreshment and satisfaction in pleasing God that so replenishes our beings that others see the effects as being much like the sustenance of a good meal when we're fainting from hunger?

Just think about this. The opposite of living to please God is living to please man. And when young women forget that life is **more** about pleasing God than pleasing the eyes of men is it really surprising that their young lives fill up with **eating disorders**? Or are we led to a host of other forms of substance abuse because at our deepest levels we lose track of the central purpose for which we were created in the first place - **the glory of God?**

True enough, Jesus pleases the Father perfectly. And hence found the greatest joy possible in accomplishing the Father's will. But we all, as sons and daughters of God, are designed to be stunned by this glorious discovery. Life is richest and best and most nourishing to our own selves - like hunger is **designed** to be satisfied by food - when we keep pleasing God the wind in the sail of our lives.

4) **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WHITE HARVEST FIELDS AND INWARD SPRINGS OF WATER**

John 4:14, 35-42 - “...but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him **a spring of water welling up to eternal life.....**35 Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest?’ **Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. 36 Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.** 37 For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.” 39 Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, “He told me all that I ever did.” 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. 41 And many more believed because of his word. 42 They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.”

There is something in this text rarely mentioned that is a first in John's gospel. Up to this point Jesus reaches out one by one. He calls His disciples to Himself one by one. He talks to Nicodemus singularly. And he speaks to this woman all alone - at first.

Then something happens in **John 4:30** - “**They went out of the town and were coming to him.**” This woman passes on what she heard from Jesus and the town - almost in mass - comes out to receive more from Jesus.

Could it be that John wants to reveal exactly what happens when the life of the Spirit produces an inward spring or river? Are we meant to witness the life of Christ as it **overflows** the first one receiving it? I think John wants the church to get this picture. Living water becoming an inward spring. It's the grace of God as it keeps bubbling up higher than any one person could contain.

Living water is meant for white fields. There can be great success from an ordinary source if the Spirit of God is truly at work. Resist the tendency toward excuse making - **John 4:35** - “**Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest?’ Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.**”

“Do you not say....?” Jesus exposes their pat answer. He reveals the attitude that overlooks the Spirit's life and the gospel's power. A new outlook is needed!

Notice the **three-fold repetition** of the outlook of faith in **John 4:35b** - “**Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.**” With the coming of Jesus the whole world must be seen differently. The sole reason it's there is to be **harvested**. It exists to be brought to Christ. What else is a harvest for if not to be gathered into barns?

