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## JESUS TEACHES US TO WITNESS (Part 1)

John 4:1-42

By

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Evangelism, Lesson 5

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If you want to learn something well, study under a master. Whether it's one of the arts, a trade, law, business, or a sport, if you have the opportunity to study under someone who knows the subject well, don't pass it up.

No one was a better master at winning souls for God than Jesus Christ. He came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). If we want to learn how to talk with people about the gospel, we can find no better teacher than Jesus. As you read in the gospels of His encounters with lost people, take note of how He did it. He never used the same approach twice. He always tailored it to the individual.

If I wanted to extend this series for several more weeks, we could study the differences in Jesus' witness to the Pharisee Nicodemus in John 3 with the Samaritan woman in John 4. The contrasts could not be much greater. He was a Jew; she was a Samaritan. He was a man; she was a woman. He was educated; she probably was not. He was a leader among his people; she was probably disrespected by her people. He was morally upright and proud of it; she was immoral and ashamed of it. He recognized Jesus' merits and sought Him; she at first had no idea who He was. Jesus sought her. Nicodemus shows that no matter how religious you may be, you still need to come to Jesus for salvation. The woman at the well shows that no matter how immoral you may be, the salvation that Jesus offers extends to you.

But I'll leave you to explore Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. This week and next, we'll study Jesus' witness to the woman at the well. I'm going to draw out 20 principles for witnessing. I know that you won't be able to remember them all, but my hope is that some of them will stick, so that you'll be better equipped as a witness for Christ. Because I'm going to give you so many principles, I'll only be able to skim over them. I hope that you will chew on them in more depth. Also, next time I will draw some lessons from this story about the person of Jesus Christ. He is the One to whom

we bear witness, and so to do it well, we must grow to know Him better. To sum it up generally:

Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well teaches us much about witnessing and much about Jesus Christ.

Before we look at the principles, we need to understand some background. The text falls into three sections: First, there is the setting for the story (4:1-6); then, there is the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well (4:7-26); finally, we read the results of this encounter: with the woman (4:27-30); with the disciples (4:31-38); and with the Samaritans (4:39-42).

Jesus left Judea and headed north towards Galilee to avoid conflict at that time with the Pharisees, who were both jealous and nervous about Jesus' increasing popularity. John says that Jesus "had" to pass through Samaria. Samaria was the region between Judea and Galilee, and so in one sense there was a geographic necessity to pass through that area as He headed north. But many strict Jews hated the Samaritans so intensely that they would take the longer route of crossing the Jordan River and avoiding Samaria altogether. So John may want us to see God's providential necessity for Jesus to travel through this region. His encounter with this woman, although seemingly coincidental, had been ordained from the foundation of the world. So in that sense, Jesus had a divine appointment in Samaria.

The village of Sychar was located about 30 miles north of Jerusalem, at the base of Mount Gerazim, the "holy mountain" for the Samaritans. Jacob's well was about one-half mile outside of town. Scholars debate whether the sixth hour was noon (Jewish time) or 6 p.m. (Roman time), although most lean toward the first view. Jesus was weary from the journey and so He sat down by Jacob's well while the disciples went into the village to buy food.

Samaritan history goes back to the time of the Assyrian victory over the northern kingdom of Israel (722 B.C.). The Assyrian king deported most of the Jews, but left a few in the land. He repopulated the area with foreigners, who intermarried with the Jews. Later, these settlers mixed their own pagan beliefs with the Jewish understanding of God. So they were a mixed race that held to a

mixed religion. They only accepted the first five books of Moses as Scripture, and modified those books in many places.

The hatred between the Samaritans and the Jews flared when the Samaritans opposed Ezra's and Nehemiah's attempts to reestablish the true worship of God in the land after the return of the southern tribes from Babylon. The break was cemented when the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerazim, rejecting Jerusalem as the place of worship. In 128 B.C., the Jews burned down the Samaritan temple, furthering the hatred between the two groups. The hostilities had not abated by Jesus' time. As John explains (4:9), "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." With that background, let's work through the story, learning from Jesus how to do a better job of sharing the good news.

JESUS' ENCOUNTER WITH THE WOMAN AT THE WELL TEACHES US MUCH ABOUT WITNESSING:

1. Contact others socially (4:7).

Given the cultural hostilities, Jesus easily could have sat quietly while the Samaritan woman came, drew her water from the well, and left. But instead, He initiated the conversation by asking her to give Him a drink. This was not a ploy on Jesus' part, in that He really was thirsty. But, as Frederick Godet observed (*Commentary on the Gospel of John* [Zondervan], 1:422), "He is not unaware that the way to gain a soul is often to ask a service of it."

Contacting others socially sounds obvious, but I confess it is one of the most difficult factors for me to overcome. As a pastor who works around other Christians, I don't have enough contact with lost people and, frankly, I don't know what to cut out of my busy schedule to make time for such contact. Maybe that's not your problem, but the longer you're a Christian, the more likely it is that you will have less contact with the lost. But we won't reach the lost if we hang out in the "holy huddle" all of the time!

2. Establish a common interest or link (4:7).

Jesus simply asked a favor as a way of making contact. By the way, this is an example of Jesus witnessing to "person X" that we talked about last week. He had never met this woman before and after this episode, He probably never saw her again. But He used this simple request to open the door for the gospel, not only to this

woman, but also to her entire town. Any common interest can be an entry point that eventually leads to the gospel.

3. Buy up the opportunity (4:10).

Jesus was alert to “buy up the opportunity” (as we also saw last week), turning the situation to spiritual things. This woman went to the well that day to perform the same task that she had done hundreds of times. She had no idea when she left home that her life was about to change dramatically. But Jesus saw this open door and grabbed the opportunity to offer this thirsty woman the water of life.

We need to watch for common situations that present us with an opportunity for the gospel. Years ago, I had some car repairs done. I went to the cashier, paid my bill, and went out to my car. As I got in the car, I thought, “That didn’t cost as much as I expected.” So I looked at the bill and realized that the girl had tallied up the parts, but not the labor. The bill should have been twice what she had charged me. I confess that the thought went through my mind, “The Lord just saved me all this money!”

But I knew that I had to go make it right. So I grabbed a gospel tract out of my glove box and went back inside. I actually had to argue with the girl to prove the error. When she finally saw it, she said, “I’m new at this job. I would have been fired when they discovered my mistake. Thank you for being honest!” That’s when I told her, “I’m not by nature an honest person. But Jesus is my Lord and Savior. Would you do me the favor of reading this booklet tonight when you go home?” I had written my phone number on the tract. I never heard from her again, but she did hear the truth about Jesus Christ.

4. Cross cultural barriers, if need be, to reach people (4:9, 27).

Jesus was not afraid of being “contaminated” by drinking out of a Samaritan woman’s cup. Nor was He afraid of talking privately with a woman about spiritual matters, although the Jewish rabbis viewed Samaritan women as ceremonially unclean (D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* [Eerdmans/Apollos], pp. 217-218). Some of the rabbis even believed that to teach your daughters the *Torah* was as inappropriate as to sell them into prostitution (*ibid.*, p.

227)! But Jesus ignored these cultural prejudices and deliberately engaged this immoral Samaritan woman in spiritual conversation.

I hope that none of us harbor any racial prejudice that would keep us from talking to those of other races about Christ. But we may have to overcome some cultural prejudices. For example, would you talk kindly in public with a transvestite about his need for Christ? Or, maybe you avoid an obnoxious person at work or school, rather than trying to build a bridge that could lead to sharing the gospel. The person may be a social outcast, as this Samaritan woman probably was. But he still needs Christ and to hear about Christ he needs a Christian who is willing to risk public scorn to talk to him.

5. Use a common situation to introduce spiritual matters (4:7-10).

I've already touched on this, but it's worth pondering how Jesus used a natural situation (His thirst and water) to begin a conversation that He quickly turned to spiritual things. Maybe it's a discussion about the world's problems—war, natural disasters, the economy, or whatever. Jesus used such things—a report of how Pilate had slaughtered some Galileans and another report of a tower collapsing and killing some people—to talk about eternal issues (Luke 13:1-5). I would urge you, however, to be careful not to turn the discussion towards politics or moral issues, rather than the person's need for Christ. His main need is not to change political parties or clean up his life, but to be reconciled with God.

6. Arouse interest by your life and words (4:7-10).

Jesus used both His actions and His words to stimulate the woman's interest. The mere fact that He, a Jewish man, would talk to her, a Samaritan woman, asking her for a drink, grabbed her attention. When she commented on that (v. 9), Jesus further aroused her curiosity by His reply (v. 10), "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." He was using "salt" to whet her thirst (see Col. 4:6). J. C. Ryle (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], 3:210) points out that if Jesus had come on with a systematic statement of doctrinal truth at this point, it would have been lost on her. Instead, He aroused her curiosity, leading to

further discussion. He didn't dump the whole thing on her at the outset, but skillfully led her along.

Bill Fay, who owned a brothel in New Orleans before he came to Christ, offers some helpful questions (on audio cassette) that we can use to arouse interest in the gospel: "Do you have any kind of spiritual belief? To you, who is Jesus? Do you think there is heaven or hell? If you died, where are you going? Why would God let you into heaven?" He advises just listening to their responses without arguing. But then, as a final question to arouse their interest, ask, "If what you believe is not true, would you want me to tell you?" It will be rare for you to get a firm, "no."

7. Use the natural to explain the supernatural (4:9-15).

Jesus used this principle repeatedly. Here, He spoke first of water and then of living water. With Nicodemus, Jesus used the new birth and the wind (perhaps a breeze blew through the room as they talked). In John 6, Jesus fed the 5,000 and then spoke of Himself as the bread of life. In John 7, on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, when the priests poured out water from the Pool of Siloam as a memorial of the thirsty nation in the wilderness, Jesus proclaimed that if anyone was thirsty, they should come to Him and drink. In John 8, Jesus claimed to be the light of the world. In John 10, He portrayed Himself as both the good shepherd and the door of the sheepfold. In John 15, He used the vine and the branches to explain our need to abide in Him.

The woman at the well was probably more concerned about her physical needs than her spiritual need. Some think that she was being somewhat sarcastic when she challenged Jesus with where He could get this "living water" (4:11). She still may have been skeptical when she asked Jesus to give her this living water (4:15). She wasn't yet focused on her spiritual need, but on the fact that she didn't want to come all that way to get water from the well.

But Jesus used her interest in natural water to lead her to see her need for the living water. By "living water," Ryle thinks that Jesus was speaking of everything that He freely gives to our needy souls: "pardon, peace, mercy, grace justification, and sanctification." He says (3:211), "As water is cleansing, purifying, cooling, refreshing, thirst-satisfying to man's body, so are Christ's gifts to

the soul. I think everything that a sinful soul needs is purposely included under the general words, 'living water.'"

8. Don't expect a completely mature response from a seeking person (4:15).

The woman's response (4:15) was somewhat mixed: "Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw." She is still thinking of physical water, but maybe she was beginning to see that He was talking of something much more lasting and substantial. Some think that she was being sarcastic. Others say that she was asking Jesus for eternal life. But I'm inclined to agree with Ryle, who says that she probably was still quite mixed up in her motives. He explains (3:217), "Our great aim must be to persuade sinners to apply to Jesus, and to say to Him, 'Give me to drink.' If we forbid them to ask anything until they can prove that they ask in a perfect spirit, we should do no good at all." He goes on to compare it to trying to analyze an infant's first cries.

9. Point out the need, but do it graciously (4:16-18).

When the woman asked Jesus for this living water, He rather abruptly said (4:16), "Go, call your husband and come here." Suddenly, the conversation moved from friendly banter to very personal. She bristled (4:17), "I have no husband." She was technically correct, but trying to divert Jesus from the truth. Jesus went for the jugular (4:17-18): "You have correctly said, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly." Suddenly, her sinful past and present were exposed. She realized that she was not talking with an ordinary man!

In order really to desire the living water that Jesus offers, a sinner must be convicted of his or her sin. As Ryle puts it (3:218), "No one values the physician until he feels his disease." But at the same time that He exposed the woman's sin, Jesus dealt with her kindly and graciously. He didn't point His finger at her and say, "You're a wicked woman! Unless you repent, you will perish!" (Ryle, 3:219). Rather, He gently agreed with her, "You have said truly." He pointed out her need, but didn't condemn her. He did the same thing with the woman caught in adultery when He told

her (John 8:11), "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."

We need the same fine balance that Jesus had here. Use God's Word to show how we're all guilty of violating His holy law. But do it graciously, pointing them to the cross.

10. Avoid arguments (4:12-14, 21-24).

In verse 12, the woman insinuates that Jesus could not be greater than Jacob, who gave them the well. In effect, she was saying, "Who do you think you are?" If Jesus had been proud, He easily could have set her straight. He probably would have won the point, but lost the woman. Then, she tries to draw Jesus into a centuries-old debate between the Samaritans and the Jews over the proper place to worship. While Jesus tactfully corrects her misperceptions, He still refuses to argue with her.

Arguments do not lead sinners to the Savior, even if you win. The reason is that in an argument, your pride gets involved. You want to prove that you're right and the other person is wrong. But you're missing the real issue. Sure, he's wrong, but conversion is much more than persuading him that he's wrong. Conversion requires God granting repentance and new life. Paul gives us the right approach (2 Tim. 2:24-26), "The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will." That's what Jesus did here:

11. Don't make concessions, but offer gentle correction (4:22).

The woman brings up the debate between the Samaritans and the Jews about the correct place to worship. While Jesus did not argue, neither did He let her errors go by without correction. He pointed out that the Samaritans worshiped in ignorance and that salvation is not from them, but from the Jews. The Messiah was promised through the descendants of Abraham and David.

Unbelievers mistakenly think that their religious ideas are just as good as anyone else's. In other words, they do not understand that one way to God is objectively true, while others are necessarily

false. Rather, they view religion as a matter of subjective preference: "You like chocolate, I like strawberry. But neither one is right or wrong." But Scripture is clear that unless we worship the one true God as He has revealed Himself through His only Son Jesus, we're worshiping idols. So we can't let people get away with the idea that it really doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere. Don't make concessions, but offer gentle correction.

12. Stick with the main issue (4:20-26).

The discussion could have veered off into a debate over the merits of Judaism versus Samaritan worship. It may have been an interesting interchange, but it would have left the woman in her sins. So Jesus shows her that it is not outward religion that matters, but rather whether we worship God in spirit and truth. Then, when the woman brings up the promise that Messiah will come, who will resolve this debate, Jesus straightforwardly declares (4:26), "I who speak to you am He." At that point, she has a choice: *Is He or isn't He?* Do I believe Him or not? So Jesus brought the discussion back to the main issue, "Who do you say that I am?" As we'll see next week, the aim in all spiritual discussions should be to bring it back to the person of Christ.

### Conclusion

Next time we'll look at the other eight principles and also at seven lessons about the person of Christ from this encounter. I conclude by asking (based on 4:13-14), "Are you drinking from the water of this world, which never fully satisfies? Or, have you drunk of the living water that Jesus gives, which has become in you a well of water springing up to eternal life?"

### Application Questions

1. What are some ways to contact unbelievers socially and establish common interests without being manipulative?
2. How can we know how quickly to direct a conversation to spiritual things? When should we back off?
3. Do you have any cultural barriers that you need to overcome to be a witness to someone you have contact with?

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