

April 3, 2011

# *Living Out The Gospel In Real Life*

## *Living Water*

John 4:1 – 19

Here in chapter four, John records a remarkable story. And if you have been a Christian for any time at all, you probably know this story well. And that fact may hinder you from seeing just how remarkable it really is. Jesus had just spent time in Jerusalem with the morally upright, religiously perfect Nicodemus – now He visits the other side of the tracks, so to speak, with a woman of Samaria. The two stories describe polar opposites: Nicodemus was a Jew – this woman, who isn't even named, is a Samaritan. Nicodemus was a man – she's a woman. He was educated – a teacher of Israel – He recognized Jesus and said 'You must be from God. She's ignorant – she didn't know who He was, although she thought He might be a prophet. Nicodemus was from the upper crust – she was strictly bottom shelf. He was wealthy – she was poor. Nicodemus had influence – she was an outcast even in her own village. You couldn't get more distinctly different individual than Nicodemus and this woman. And I believe one reason John relates the two stories so close together was to demonstrate that the gospel cuts across all racial, social, economic, gender barriers to bring the Good News of salvation to all people.

And these two accounts also highlight the fact that there is no one size fits all approach to evangelism. With Nicodemus Jesus tells him 'You are doing it all wrong – you are trusting in things that are of no value in the kingdom – you must be born again'. He is brutally direct and confrontational. But with this woman He is gentle – no less direct, but gently so. What this says to us I believe, is that we need to know where people are coming from – what is their world view – how does that shape how they see things – what are their cultural blinders? Jesus knew Nicodemus. He knew the religious pride that was keeping him out of the kingdom – and He went directly at it. And here, Jesus knew this woman's guilt and shame and incredible thirst for more that was keeping her from the kingdom and He spoke to that. So let's look at this story with open hearts and listening ears to hear what God is saying to us.

*Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were), He left Judea and went away again into Galilee.* John 4:1-3 When we read that Jesus left Judea because of what the Pharisees had heard, we should not suppose that He was afraid of what they thought. He left Judea for two reasons – one was that **His time was not yet come** to confront the Jews openly as He ultimately does; and the other was that **He had a divine appointment** with one woman in a village in Samaria. Jesus was always doing the counter intuitive thing. He was at the Jordan teaching His disciples, great crowds were come and the disciples were baptizing them – His ministry was really taking off. And then He abruptly leaves all those people to go into a backwater region of the country to meet one woman. And you might think, what was the value of one woman?

And I would say you cannot estimate the worth of anyone's ministry by the numbers of people they personally brought to Christ. Look at Andrew, Simon Peter's brother – Andrew was won by Christ, and when Andrew was won, he brought Peter, and when Peter was won, three thousand came to Christ at Pentecost. Ezra Kimball was a Sunday School teacher in 1858 when a young man by the name of D.L. Moody was converted to Christ under his teaching, and when Moody was won, hundreds of thousands more on two continents could point to his preaching that won them to Christ. And so Jesus had a divine appointment in Samaria with one woman there, and He leaves the crowds by the river to go there.

And the Scripture confirms this thought as it says: *And He had to pass through Samaria.* John 4:4 Apart from divine mission, Jesus did not **have** to pass through Samaria. He was headed to Galilee, which was north of Samaria, and He was coming from the river Jordan which meant that all He had to do was head north along the river until He crossed over into Galilee. There were no compelling geographic reasons He had to pass through Samaria on the way to Galilee. And even more there were no compelling cultural reasons He should do so. For Jews going from Judea into Galilee, the route they would have taken went **around** Samaria, not through it. They went miles out of their way **not** to go through Samaria. But here, John does not want us to miss the divine leading in Jesus' ministry. Jesus didn't just decide that He would blast the deep-rooted cultural prejudice of the Jews against the Samaritans and go through Samaria rather than around it. Instead He was led, as He was always led by His Father's directives. **And His Father had a meeting planned for Him at a certain well, at a certain time with a certain woman, in a certain city of Samaria.**

*So He came to a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph; and Jacob's well was there.* John 4:5-6a This was the place we read about in Genesis 33 that Jacob bought from Shechem's father in order to pitch his tent and live there. Eventually Jacob dug a well that was evidently still in use at this time. In fact if you go there today, you can still see the well I'm told, although a Greek Orthodox monastery has been built around it so there is very little of the original site left. But the well itself was over one hundred feet deep, dug out of solid rock and fed by a spring near the bottom of the well.

*So Jesus, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour.* John 4:6b If John was using the Jewish reckoning of time here, this would have been at noon, but as we have already seen, he was probably using Roman time so it was more likely around six in the evening. By the way, this little description of Jesus being tired from the journey speaks to the fact that although He was the Son of God, He was also the Son of Man and experienced all the physical infirmities of humans. And that is crucial if we are to have **a Savior who knows our weaknesses and has felt our pains.** *For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. 16 Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* Hebrews 4:15

*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.* John 4:7-8 I don't think we understand this the way a first century reader would have so I want to give you a little background. Jesus purposely went through Samaria, and He purposely came to this particular city called Sychar, which happened to be the chief city of the Samaritans. The Samaritans were descendants of the intermarriage between the surviving Jews who were not deported to Assyria when that nation conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, and the foreigners who were settled among them after the conquest. The strict prohibition against marriage to foreigners was set aside and what orthodox Jews considered racially impure people resulted. Samaritans were viewed as half-breeds, not true Jews. And in a way, they were worse than Gentiles to a Jew because at least the Gentiles were pure gentile.

The intermingling of the Israelites and foreigners also produced a syncretistic religion. The pagan practices of the foreigners were mixed with the Jewish religion and 2 Kings tells us what that looked like: *But every nation still made gods of its own and put them in the houses of the high places which the people of Samaria had made, every nation in their cities in which they lived. The men of Babylon made Succoth-benoth, the men of Cuth made Nergal, the men of Hamath made Ashima, and the Avvites made Nibhaz and Tartak; and the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech the gods of Sepharvaim. They also feared the LORD and appointed from among themselves priests of the high places, who acted for them in the houses of the high places. They feared the LORD and served their own gods according to the custom of the nations from among whom they had been carried away into exile... So while these nations feared the LORD, they also served their idols; their children likewise and their grandchildren, as their fathers did, so they do to this day.* 2 Kings 17:29-33, 41

So here is Jesus, on the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak, asking a Samaritan woman for a drink. Presumably she came to the well with a bucket, and she later remarks on the fact that Jesus had no bucket, and so we have to assume He wanted a drink from her bucket. We are far removed in time from the prejudice of this era and probably find it hard to imagine the intense disdain and utter disregard the Jews had for Samaritans. A Samaritan to a Jew was ceremonially unclean because of their mixed heritage – they were racially impure – and they were religiously heretical – adhering only to the first five books of the Law and having their own place of worship on Mount Gerizim. To feel the impact of such a request, we need to go back in our own history a few years, and down to a region of our own country where such attitudes were common.

Ever since the great, bloody civil war that ravaged this country and abolished slavery in this land, many of the southern states that fought to preserve slavery instituted a two-tier society in which white people were on top and black people, former slaves for the most part, were on the bottom. It was normal in southern towns and cities to see two water fountains in public places with signs over them: 'White' and 'Colored'. You have to wonder at the depth of racial hatred that would cause you to design your entire plumbing system around the unwillingness to drink from the same fountain. What Jesus does is stand by the 'Colored' fountain, wait until this black lady comes along, and then ask if He can have a drink out of her water bottle.

Which is why the woman responds as she does: *Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?"* (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) John 4:9 Literally this says 'Jews do not use together with Samaritans'. That is, Jews would rather die of thirst than even consider drinking out of the same water bottle as a Samaritan. Samaritans were dirty, they were despised, they were impure and no self-respecting Jew, much less a Rabbi would have been caught dead drinking out of the same container as a Samaritan. But Jesus broke all the rules that men had laid down. He was a man, alone, speaking with a woman of a despised race – a woman who we later learn is not a moral woman, and He asks for a drink from her cup. You cannot get any more counter-cultural than this. But Jesus didn't come to confirm our cultural and racial prejudices – He came pursuing us, in spite of cultural and racial and social and all the other barriers of life. If you haven't noticed anything else about this story, notice this – Jesus was pursuing this woman, because His Father means to have her in His kingdom.

What this says to us is what is said over and over in the Scriptures: '*You did not choose Me but I chose you,*' John 15:16 Because the plain truth is, if He had not chosen us we would not have chosen Him. Over a hundred years ago, a man named Francis Thompson wrote a poem entitled, *The Hound of Heaven*, describing the inexorable pursuit by the Lord of those whom He was after:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
Up vistaed hopes I sped;  
And shot, precipitated,  
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,  
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.  
But with unhurrying chase,  
And unperturbèd pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
They beat--and a Voice beat  
More instant than the Feet--  
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."*

The things that betrayed Francis Thompson were the things that betray all of us. All the things of life that we drink in to satisfy our thirst ultimately betray us because they are at once ineffective and impotent to satisfy the deep soul thirst for God. They promise thirst-quenching but they end up making us more thirsty. The stuff of life was never meant to quench our eternal thirst for God – they were only meant to point us to the genuine thirst-quencher, the ultimate joy and satisfaction of knowing Jesus. God made us with appetites and the capacity for hunger and thirst because He meant to fill us up with Himself.

Jesus came to the well because He knew that He would meet a thirsty woman. And He begins the conversation with a request calculated to point her to that thirst she had been trying to satisfy for years and yet was unable to quench – '*Give Me a drink*'. The question was designed to awaken her spiritual senses because Jesus had an agenda. There are a couple of thoughts that I take away from this. The first is that **there are no accidental encounters**. The sovereignty of God does not leave room for random accidents. There is no room in His plans for chance encounters. He is a God who orchestrated all the events that led to a ragged bunch of farmers in Italy becoming rulers of the world and imposing a census so that one day Joseph would have to take Mary to a backwater town in Palestine to have a baby in a certain stable in order to fulfill a 700 year old prophecy. Which meant that He was orchestrating the lives of millions of people, fulfilling the endless details of His plan at the same time. Which means that He is orchestrating all the details of your life and leaves nothing to chance. So the next time you are confronted with say, a stranger that you might be inclined to brush off – think about this. **They might need you to ask them for a drink.**

You say, 'What do you mean'? Let me put it this way, (by the way, this is the second thing). Jesus' conversation was devoted to one thing – to awaken her spiritual senses to God. We would do well to imitate Jesus in this. We should be thinking about the kinds of questions that will take a person from unconcern about God to thoughtful inquiry. For example, there was a little video series that we did a couple of years ago called, '*Sharing Jesus Without Fear*'. In that video, the speaker shared the kind of calculated, leading questions he asked people with whom he came into contact. He would ask them first of all, 'Do you have any kind of spiritual belief?'

That is a great question because while this wasn't true even twenty years ago, everybody now has some sort of spiritual world view that they are only too happy to share with you. And then he would go on to ask them who they thought Jesus was, did they believe in heaven and hell, and finally he would ask them that if what they believed were not true, would they want to know it?

This is the equivalent of 'Can I get a drink from you'? What that led to was Jesus moving from the physical to the spiritual: *Jesus answered and said to her, "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."* John 4:10 Our conversations cannot remain casual and insipid. We need to direct people to the source of life. Evangelism is not a suggestion – **evangelism is an imperative**. You cannot be silent about the gift of God. Suppose you knew about a cure for an incurable disease like MS or Parkinsons or the like, and the treatment although expensive, was absolutely free to those who suffered from it. Suppose you ran into me and I told you I had that disease, and then we parted without you telling me a single thing about it. What would that make you? Unconcerned, unloving, at best – unconverted at worst.

But Jesus goes directly to it: *'I'm not talking about water – I'm talking about **Water**!* Living water. You see, while this well water was not exactly dead – it was not living water. Living water is water that moves – has life, and Jesus begins pointing her to what she was really after – not just a jug of well water. But she still doesn't get it: *She said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water? "You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself and his sons and his cattle ?"* John 4:11-12 But notice she begins to talk about the Bible, she begins to talk about spiritual things. I have found that most people you engage this way have many unanswered questions about God and humanity and Jesus and heaven and hell, whether or not they profess to believe in God at first. Thirst, spiritual thirst is a human condition. You usually don't have to work too hard to draw people out.

*Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst ; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life."* John 4:13-14 In Philadelphia there's a place on the Schuylkill River and on the river at a place called Boathouse Row there is a stream that comes into the river at that point. And if you follow the stream over the hill into the city you come to a spring, and over the spring there is an inscription, put there by a long ago Philadelphia city council that reads: **'Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again'**.

Here Jesus makes an observation and an offer and an answer. The **observation** is that we all have an insatiable thirst and all the water, all the things, in this world will never quench that thirst. And Jesus tells her, and He tells us, that **what that well water temporarily does for a parched throat – His living water will do eternally for the thirsty soul**. This woman's condition is our condition, her thirst is our thirst, her attempts to satisfy her thirst with men means that she has to keep going to that well, never getting that thirst quenched. The things of this life do not have the capacity to quench our soul thirst. It would be like drinking maple syrup when you are dying of thirst. Not a great thirst-quencher. There is a craving within our soul that cannot be satisfied with anything of this world and if we keep putting down the bucket of our soul in the well of this world, not only will our thirst not be satisfied, but it will actually increase.

We all know this to be true – believers and unbelievers alike testify to the fact that things alone cannot quench the soul thirst that is the condition of all men. And so Jesus makes the observation to this woman that she was letting down the bucket of her soul into water that would never satisfy. He then makes her the **offer** of another kind of water – living water – that alone has the qualities that will satisfy the thirsty soul. **'You are drinking from the well of this world and that water will only make you thirstier – I have water that will satisfy!** It is water that brings eternal life. It is water of heaven – not of earth. His offer is another life. The best that you can do with this well water is to keep feeding the flames of desire that cannot be quenched. But the water that Christ is offering you will satisfy all your desires. C.S. Lewis once wrote: **"If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world."** - C.S Lewis

And then Jesus gives her the **answer** – a new spring: *but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life."* Our problem is not so much that we have wants and needs and desires. It is that we try to fill those wants and needs and desires illegitimately. She had some need, either for significance, or purpose or love and she had been drinking from the well of relationships, trying to satisfy that need in men. And Jesus says, you need a new well, a new spring.

It is exactly the same thing He told Nicodemus – 'You must be born again – born from above'. To the woman He says, 'Your well won't do – you need the well of heaven – you need the springs of life born in your heart.' God alone, eternal life alone will quench that thirst. As the Psalmist said: *How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God ! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings. They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house ; And You give them to drink of the river of Your delights. For with You is the fountain of life; In Your light we see light.* Psalm 36:7-9 And over in Psalm 87:7: '*All my springs are in You.*'

Are all your springs in Him? That is, is your thirst for significance, for love, for purpose found in Christ or in things or people or the stuff of life? The observation, the truth of the matter is that we all have a thirst that will not be satisfied by the springs of this life. The offer is water that will satisfy, and the answer is to put down the bucket of your soul into the well of living water, and say as the woman at the well said: *The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw."* John 4:15 To paraphrase C.S. Lewis: ***If you find yourself with a thirst that nothing in this world can satisfy, you've been drinking from the wrong well.*** Come to Christ who is the fountain of life and drink and be satisfied.

*Our gracious heavenly Father,*

*Too long we have come again and again to the well of this life only to find that our thirst is still not quenched. In our search for meaning, purpose, significance, love and acceptance we have filled our bucket with so many other things only to find that our thirst has instead raged unchecked. Give us, we pray, this living water so that we will not come to the well of the word to draw its water. Let us drink our fill of the abundance of Your house and slake our thirst in the river of Your delights. May we say with the Psalmist – 'All our springs are in You' and delight ourselves in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray, in the precious, thirst-quenching and life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*