

Witnessing to Sinners

John 4:3–42
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Today, we come to the end of our series on the Bible and gender. A lot more could be said (and maybe should be said), but hopefully we've laid a foundation for understanding the issues from a Biblical perspective.

But there's still one matter to consider, and that's how to talk to those who are enslaved to modern gender confusion or at least open to it. This can be tricky because the subject itself makes us uncomfortable and those who hold wrong views of it are often intolerant of other opinions.

Does this mean we can't or shouldn't say anything at all? Of course not. The Bible commands us to be salt and light, which means nothing unless we're salt and light to those who embrace extremely dark ideas. But it also requires us, as Jesus said, to be *wise as serpents, and harmless as doves* (Matt. 10:16). So, how should we go about it?

For this, we turn to the gospel of John, chapter 4, and Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well. Her sin wasn't homosexuality or transgenderism, but it was sexual in nature. In this passage, we see Jesus meeting her needs in ways she never could have imagined.

Give Me to Drink

The background leading up to this conversation is pretty straightforward. Jesus had been ministering in the south, somewhere near John the Baptist. He left there and traveled to a city of Samaria called Sychar, where the patriarch Jacob built a well two thousand years earlier. When Jesus arrived, he was tired from the journey. Depending on the exact locations of his starting point and destination, he and his disciples would have walked between thirty and fifty miles. So, arriving at Jacob's well at the sixth hour — either noon, if John used the Jewish method of counting time, or 6 PM, if he used a Roman system — Jesus asked a woman of Samaria for a drink.

We don't have to go any further to see that something's not quite right here. Why? Because this woman apparently went to the well alone. The practice of the ancient world was for women to draw water in groups. They usually did this either early in the morning or early in the evening. The fact that this woman went to the well alone slightly favors, but doesn't require, the sixth hour being

noon. But this isn't the important thing. Of much greater significance is why she was alone. She was alone because she was an outcast. We'll see why in a minute.

This woman was taken aback by Jesus' request. She said, *How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.* She didn't mean that the Jews and Samaritans never interacted with each other. In fact, we see Jesus' disciples doing business with them in this very chapter. Verse 8 says that they went into a Samaritan village to buy food. Rather, she meant that they didn't share eating utensils. Yet, here's Jesus asking to drink from a Samaritan woman's cup. Strange! She may also have wondered why he spoke to her since she had obviously been excluded from the fellowship of other women. Even the disciples were puzzled by this when they arrived later, but they didn't say a word.

At this point, Jesus used this woman's observation to go right to the heart of her problem. He said, *If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.* He told her that she needed salvation, but he did so in an amazingly powerful, yet disarming, way. Four things stand out here.

- First, Jesus spoke of salvation as *living water*. The Old Testament uses this phrase for gospel blessings. Jeremiah 2:13 says, *For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.* Likewise, Zechariah 14:8, describing how the gospel would go out into all the world after the fall of Jerusalem, says, *And it shall be in that day, that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem; half of them toward the former sea, and half of them toward the hinder sea: in summer and in winter shall it be.* But would the woman have known this? The Samaritans didn't have Jeremiah and Zechariah in their Bibles. Their Scriptures consisted only of the five books of Moses — Genesis through Deuteronomy. So, how could this woman have known what Jesus meant? It's because she had Exodus 17, where God commanded Moses to strike the rock to give his people water — flowing water, living water. The Israelites were thirsty, and the Lord satisfied their need.
- Second, Jesus also spoke of salvation as God's gift. Gifts are neither earned nor deserved, but come solely by the generosity of the giver. And God's gift — the greatest gift of all — came in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In the previous chapter, Jesus said to Nicodemus, *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life* (John 3:16).
- Third, Jesus made it clear to the woman at the well that she had to receive this gift through him. There was no other way. Instead of him asking her for a drink, she had to ask him for one.

- And fourth, the fact that Jesus proclaimed salvation to this woman showed that she needed God's gift — living water — that Jesus offered her. Remember, she went to the well alone, an outcast, out of fellowship with other women. She was morally bankrupt. She had no life in her soul, just an emptiness she tried to satisfy with marriage and sex. This is where sin takes us. It promises everything but gives nothing. It assures us of happiness and fulfillment but never delivers. Thus, it becomes addictive. We always hope that the next sin will give us what all our previous sins couldn't.

The Samaritan woman didn't know what Jesus meant. Just like Nicodemus, who wondered how he could crawl back into his mother's womb and be born again, this woman couldn't figure out how Jesus could give her living water when he didn't even have a bucket. So, Jesus encouraged her to think of a different kind of water — one that can't be drawn in a pail but, when a person drinks it, he never thirsts again because it so completely satisfies his needs. Verses 13 and 14 say, *Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.*

This part of Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well ends in verse 15 with the woman asking Jesus to give her this special living water.

This Woman's Real Need

At this point, Jesus zeroed in on the Samaritan woman's needs even more. Already knowing her marital status, he told her to fetch her husband, which she responded to by saying that she had none. She wasn't married. Technically, she was right: the man she was living with wasn't her husband. But this was just the tip of the iceberg. This woman had completely glossed over all the emptiness that her previous five marriages had failed to give her. Now, I suppose it's possible that her five husbands had all died, which of course would have left her free to marry again, but this doesn't seem to be the point. It's more likely that she had such a low view of marriage and its divine institution that she married and divorced freely. Her marriages comprised one adulterous relationship after another. As Jesus said, *Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery* (Matt. 19:9).

This woman's life bears a striking resemblance to many Hollywood marriages. Consider, for example, the three Gabor sisters. Between them, they had a total of twenty marriages: Magda was

married six times, Zsa Zsa nine, and Eva five. And one of their husbands, a man named George Sanders, married both Magda and Zsa Zsa at different times.

Multiple marriages are often a sign of the emptiness we spoke of earlier. Actually, most persistent sin is, especially sexual sin — everything from self-pleasure to outright adultery to homosexuality. It's all a cry for something more, something lasting, something meaningful. It's a sign of emptiness because it never satisfies. Proverbs 27:20 says, *Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied*. But a godly man can be and is satisfied. Do you remember what Solomon wrote in Proverbs 5:19 about a godly man's satisfaction with his wife? The Bible requires this kind of satisfaction in elders, who must be husbands of one wife, i.e., men who are satisfied with one woman (1 Tim. 3:2).

The woman at the well responded to Jesus telling her about her marriages by recognizing in verse 19 that he was a prophet. It's true, of course, that Jesus was a prophet. He taught the way of salvation. But it would be better to say that he's *the* prophet, i.e., the ultimate prophet Moses wrote about. This may be what she meant. But it's not enough. She needed more.

Some commentators don't quite know what to do with what follows. Many of them suppose that the woman, being embarrassed by her moral failure and thinking Jesus was getting a little too personal, tried to distract him by asking about worship. So she said, *Our fathers [the Samaritans] worshipped in this mountain [nearby Mount Gerizim]; and ye [the Jews] say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship*.

I don't believe this is what the woman meant at all. I think she saw her need for the first time but didn't know what to do with it. There were two competing ideas about how sinners can approach God. The Samaritans worshiped on one mountain and were guided solely by the five books of Moses. Their temple stood on this mountain until the Jews destroyed it about one hundred sixty years earlier. But the Jews worshiped elsewhere and followed the entire Old Testament. Their temple was in Jerusalem. It was first constructed by Solomon, later rebuilt after Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it, and then enlarged and glorified by Herod the Great. But both systems can't be right. The woman wanted to know the right way to approach God.

Jesus' answer must have been quite a shock to her. Why? Because he said that neither system was the final answer. The Samaritan temple wasn't the way to God because God hadn't authorized it. In fact, the Samaritans didn't even know God. Jesus said, *Ye worship ye know not what*. But the Jewish temple wasn't much better in the long run because it was designed to be temporary and would soon be destroyed. But at least the Jews worshiped the right God. Jesus said, *We know what we worship*. And because the Lord had made special promises to Abraham, the Jews had been the recipients of his favor for generations. As Jesus said, *Salvation is of the Jews*.

But the hour was coming when all of this would change. Look carefully at what Jesus said in verse 21: *The hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.* Jesus said, *Ye*, referring to the Samaritans. They would worship the true and living God wherever they happened to be. The fulfillment of this began in the book of Acts when the disciples, having dispersed after Stephen's martyrdom, preached in Samaria. But a more important hour had already arrived: it wasn't just coming, but now is. This is the hour *when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth*. What is this hour? It's the hour in which the grand purpose of redemption gives sinners direct access to the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. This hour had arrived because Jesus was already calling men and women, including the woman of Samaria, to believe in him. Later in this chapter, we see that many Samaritans believed in him.

There's no difference between Jewish believers and Samaritan believers. As the Jerusalem Council decreed concerning Gentile converts in Acts 15, God *put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith* (v. 9). The Samaritan woman could have the blessings of salvation as much as anyone else. She could have them despite her sins. She didn't need a mountain. Jesus called her to worship the Father through him.

This is where the Samaritan woman began to realize that Jesus was talking about himself. She asked about the Messiah in verse 25. She knew that the Messiah, when he comes, would teach everything a person needed to know to be right with God. Could it be that this man who asked her for a drink of water was the Messiah? Yes! And Jesus said so in verse 26: *I that speak unto thee am he*. Upon hearing this, she went out and told everyone about Jesus. She became a more effective preacher than the twelve. They came back from town with a handful of food, but she led many converts to Jesus Christ.

This morning, we've only considered the main points of our text. How did Jesus evangelize a woman caught up in a life of sexual sin?

First, and extremely important, he didn't begin with her sin or point a finger at her. He began with an offer of salvation — the free gift of God, the living water.

Second, Jesus addressed this woman's sin in a roundabout way, i.e., by asking her to call her husband, knowing she would lie about her marital status. He did this to bring her sin into the conversation because he wanted her to accept the emptiness and vanity of everything she had done so she could find the answer in him. He addressed her need.

And finally, when she saw that Jesus had what she needed and asked him how to get it, Jesus told her. The Father wants worshipers. He wants you. He wants you to go to him through his only begotten Son.

Too often, we keep the focus of evangelism on a person's sin. We can't avoid sin altogether. Without it, the gospel has no meaning. But our focus must always be on Jesus and what he accomplished for everyone who believes in him. We need to make sure that unbelievers know that God has done great things!

The specific sin that captivates a person's life and attention isn't the issue. That's why I haven't spent a lot of time in this series looking at every verse on homosexuality, transvestitism, transgenderism, and so forth. Regardless of our sin, Jesus is the answer. We need to lead sinners to him. Winning arguments won't help; making disciples does. Amen.