

The Woman at the Well

by W.F. Anderson

The sermon highlights how Jesus transcended cultural and moral barriers to offer salvation to the Samaritan woman at the well, exemplifying His love and acceptance for all people.

Duration: 30:47

Scripture: John 4:1-9, John 4:28-34, John 4:39-42

Topics: "Human Struggle", "Repentance"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a story about missionaries waiting for native believers to get a boat back into the dump. The boat kept breaking down, leading the missionaries to seek God's guidance. They met with the natives and one of the missionaries, Jacob Lohan, confessed his own sexual problems, realizing that he had been living a hypocritical life. The speaker emphasizes that Jesus was not a superhuman, but a tired and weary Jew who was honest about his needs. The sermon also discusses the importance of addressing sin and temptation within the church and acknowledging that all humans face these struggles.

Transcript

I'd like to read a familiar portion in the New Testament, John's Gospel, chapter 4, beginning with verse 1. John, chapter 4, and verse 1. Now, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John, although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples, he left Judea and departed again to Galilee. He had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph.

Jacob's well was there, and so Jesus, weird as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about six o'clock. There came a woman of Samaria to draw water, and 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 a drink of me, a woman of Samaria? For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, if you knew the gift of God, and who it is that's saying to you, give me a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.

The woman said to him, sir, you've nothing to draw with. The well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Verse 16, Jesus said to her, go call your husband and come here.

The woman answered him, I have no husband. Jesus said to her, you're right in saying I have no husband. For you have five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband.

The fish who said truly. Verse 27, just then his disciples came, and they marveled that he was talking with a woman. None said, what do you wish, or why are you talking with her? So the woman left her water jar and went away into the city and said to the people, come, see a man who told me all that I ever did.

Can this be the Christ? And they went out of the city and were coming to him. Meanwhile, the disciples beside him saying, Rabbi, eat. But he said to them, I have food to eat of which you do not know.

So the disciples said to one another, has anyone brought him food? Jesus said to them, my food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work. Do you not say there are yet four months, then comes the harvest? I tell you, lift up your eyes and see how the fields are already white for harvest. In a family magazine a couple of years ago, my wife drew my attention to an article that concerned better husband-wife communication.

In the course of that article, the author made this statement. We cannot really talk to someone we hate, or to someone we feel disapproves of us, or against whose anger we feel we must constantly defend ourselves. We cannot really talk to someone we hate, or to someone we feel disapproves of us, or against whose anger we feel we must constantly defend ourselves.

That's pretty well the situation our Lord found himself in in Samaria when this woman came to the well of Sychar. There were certain basic prejudices that existed in that situation that we've read about today. The first was a racial prejudice between Jew and Samaritan.

The second was a moral prejudice, that is, this woman was guilty of quite gross sin, our Lord was the epitome of There was a deep gulf between the two so far as the whole field of morals is concerned. There was a religious prejudice. She was a member of a group who worshipped on Mount Gerizim, and there had been constant friction over the religious rites performed in Gerizim as over against the religious rites performed in Jerusalem.

And there was, last of all, what I would say is sexual barriers. She was a woman and he was a man, and that had a great deal of significance in Eastern culture back in our Lord's day. What I'm interested in, since our Lord became man, the eternal God has become man and lived genuinely as a human being.

He, in this human life, not only lived exactly as we live apart from sin, experienced what we experience, in that context he expressed God. What would it be like for God to be here among us? Well, here it is. This is what God is like.

What I'm interested in tonight is how our Lord bridged those gulfs that existed between him as a Jew and him as the Son of God and that woman as a Samaritan, and a sinful Samaritan. How our Lord bridged those gulfs and got through to her, just as an expression of our Lord's attitude toward us tonight. Let's take those prejudices.

I'm primarily concerned with two, since our time is somewhat limited. I'm concerned with the racial prejudice that existed, and I'm concerned with the moral issue of our Lord and race, as evidence of a gulf that exists between him and her. First of all, just to mention in passing, by the way, the sexual prejudice that exists between men and women, did you notice that our Lord's disciples were quite astonished? What in the world did they do talking with a woman? The rabbis had a saying that it would be better to burn the

law than to discuss it with a woman.

And when a rabbi was going to the synagogue, he always made sure that his wife stayed some distance behind him, and he went in alone. He didn't want to have the disgrace of a rabbi being seen with a woman, even though this woman was his own wife. A woman simply was not capable of entering into any understanding of the discussion of the law, and the disciples marveled that he talked with a woman.

But the real prejudice that I want to get to is, first of all, the racial prejudice, the deep prejudice that existed between Jew and Samaritan in the days of our Lord Jesus. This goes way back to the exile of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, back in the 8th century before Christ. And when the Assyrians deported the population of the Northern province of Israel and resettled Gentiles in that country, and then there was an intermarriage, out of this intermarriage came what the Jews looked on as a mongrel race of Samaritans, and the prejudice was deep and bitter.

Here, we read John's comment that the social dealing--they could have business dealings, they could make money off them, or they could buy food in need, as the disciples were doing, but no social business at all. You didn't sit down to the same table with a Samaritan. You certainly wouldn't spend any time in his home on a social basis.

This prejudice, in fact, they ran pretty deep. It was not unusual in periods of Jewish history, in the synagogues, to have prayers cursing the Samaritans, asking God to curse the Samaritans. The testimony of a Samaritan was unacceptable in a Jewish court.

If a Samaritan were witness to an incident that came up in a Jewish court, his testimony was simply not acceptable. You wouldn't trust the word of a Samaritan. In fact, at times in Jewish history, a Samaritan was not even a fit subject for conversion.

If a Samaritan were to come and want to be circumcised, or want to become a member of the nation of Israel, want to worship in Jerusalem, would want to become a Jew, he would be told no. He was not a fit subject for conversion. Prejudice ran pretty deep.

So, when our Lord came to Samaritans--well, at Sychar--and this Samaritan woman came, there was already some bitterness on her part toward him. And she expressed it. And I have no way--we just read words, of course--but every language is tonal.

We express meaning in tone, and I don't know just what her tone was. How is it that you, being a Jew, asked a drink of me, which in the woman's merit? Maybe it was in such a tone to express bitterness that there was a deep gulf between Jews and Samaritans. How did our Lord break this gulf? First, it seems to me, by not pretending to be something he wasn't.

Sometimes, in our attempts to bridge gulfs, we go about it artificially. Our Lord did not pretend to be something he wasn't. He acknowledged he was a Jew.

He didn't try to hide the fact. He didn't try to minimize the importance of God's revelation in Jerusalem, and that Jerusalem was the city of God. He didn't try to cover up or pretend to be what he was not.

It seems to me the second way our Lord breaks this gulf is just by being himself. There's a possible change in this translation that I could make in verse 6. This particular text says, Jesus' well was there, and Jacob's well was there, and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey. Let me take out that little

expression, as he was, and move it.

It's possible to do this. It could read, Jesus, wearied with his journey, sat down as he was beside the well. But our Lord was not hiding his weariness.

Sometimes, in order to reach people, we will cover up our own humanity, our weakness, and we have a tendency to present ourselves as Christians as plaster saints, and Christianity never gets through a plaster saint. If there's one thing my children resent, it's having a code of conduct imposed on them because they're creature's kids. Frankly, I resent it myself.

An artificial standard for we cannot be human, and where my children know me as one thing in the home and another thing in front of Christians when I'm in the pulpit. And if you think that doesn't play havoc with Christianity. And so as far as we can, we keep away the artificial standard.

I'll tell you when that really hit me, is the first Sunday, and maybe I told you about this too, the first Sunday our son remembered the Lord was, something of course I'd been waiting for some time, and this was going to be it. And the first Sunday he remembered the Lord was Christians in the local church. I was away, I was out preaching.

And the second Sunday I was home, and that Sunday our two girls got sick, and my wife said, well she would stay home with the girls, and my son and I could go to the Lord's supper together. Man, this was, you know, the two of us, this was great. And the meeting hadn't been going on very long, and I was going to get to pray, and I got halfway up out of my seat, and I said, because halfway up, it hit me, you're sitting here with this son, remembering the Lord, see? And he's lived with you all this past week, and for a good number of years, and he knows that a great deal of what you were going to say is a pack of lies.

It sounds good, but he hasn't seen a bit of it in a whole long week. And so I sat back down, and by the time I worked out an honest prayer, the meeting was over. But our Lord, our Lord made no pretenses.

He was weary. He was tired. He was worn out.

He wasn't a Superman. He didn't brush himself off, and shake himself, and pretend he wasn't tired. He was just what he was, a tired Jew, hungry, thirsty, sitting beside the well.

In this same area, a man who has been a tremendous amount of help to me is a man I've never met, but I sure like Jacob Lowen, who's a Mennonite anthropologist and missionary, and writes frequently in a little magazine called Practical Anthropology, one of the most helpful magazines I read. He was talking about an issue among the Panamanian Indians in one of the churches. This is really getting over into the area of sin, but where one of the leaders of a native church was suspected of adultery, and when the missionary leaders, the leaders from the mission, came to a certain city in Panama, and called the leaders of this local church, including the man who was the suspect, to a meeting, nothing happened.

They met for, I think, three days, and every time the issue was raised, the natives just shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads, didn't know a thing about it. So, the meeting broke up. The leaders of the mission went back to headquarters, and Jacob Lowen and two other missionaries were waiting for these native believers to get a boat back into the jungle.

About three mornings in a row, the boat broke down. These natives couldn't leave, and Jacob Lowen and his fellow companions began to think, well, God must have something in this. We've got to get on our

knees again and find out what he's got for us.

So, they met with the natives again, and this time Jacob Lowen began to unburden himself, and he began to confess his own sexual problems. Being away on trips three months at a time, doing work in the area of anthropology for the Mennonites, being separated from his wife, the terrible temptations he felt, and how even when he was home, his own selfishness created problems between himself and his wife, and in turn, each of the missionaries acknowledged they faced these same problems. And then Jacob Lowen says, and how about our native brethren? Perhaps you can share with us that you faced these problems, and immediately, the guilty individual said, but as long as we're going to be artificial, and we're not going to sit as we are, we're going to have a difficult time reaching people.

Our Lord didn't do that as he was. The third way our Lord bridged this gulf, seemed to me, was in an overt act by which he indicated, as human beings, there is no difference between me and you. As human beings, that's all I'm saying.

He said to this woman, give me a drink, and he was thirsty. This was no artificial request again. Give me a drink.

Now, I'm interested in her comment when he said, I'll give you living water. She said, sir, the well is deep, and you don't have a thing to throw away. How are you going to get this water? So he was there without a bucket.

Now, every traveling party in the Near East carried a little leather bucket with them for just such occasions. You come to a well, you let the bucket down, you've got something to drink with. Evidently, the disciples, when they went into the village, carried the bucket with them, and he didn't have any bucket here.

And she said, how are you going to get a drink of water if you don't even have a bucket to throw away? Well, now, when he asks her for a drink, and he doesn't have a bucket of his own, he's telling her, I'll drink out of your bucket. And the Jews don't have any of that social intercourse with the Samaritans. You wouldn't sit at the same table with the Samaritans.

Our Lord is saying, I don't have those prejudices. You draw the water with your bucket, and I'll drink out of the same bucket you drink out of. This is the way God is.

That's an expression of the heart of God. I remember Don Cole telling me that when he first went out to Africa in Gola, the young missionary, rather naive, he and a native believer were building a little shed at the back of his house, the back of Don's house. They got thirsty, and Don turned to the native who suggested eating in the house, and asked Naomi to fix him some coffee.

And Naomi fixed three cups of coffee, and she took one, and the native picked one up and carried it out to Don, and he was out there empty-handed. The native was empty-handed, and Don said, well, didn't she fix you one? No, no. And when they investigated, Naomi had taken the china down, and had poured three china cups of coffee.

And the native said that wasn't for him, because up to that point when missionaries poured coffee, they kept an old tin cup for the native while they drank out of the china. And that native just couldn't believe that he was going to be allowed to drink out of the same china they drank out of. Twenty years later, when Don and Naomi were leaving this last time, there was a farewell meeting.

One of the elders of one of the local native churches, who was that young believer twenty years ago, got up and related that incident. Twenty years later, the thing that stood out in his mind was the Coles were willing to let me drink out of their china. Our Lord says, I'll drink out of your cup.

There aren't any barriers. Look, friend, I don't know who you are, I don't know what your condition is. If there are any barriers between you and Jesus Christ, they're on your side and not his.

But there's a moral issue that lay between them that our Lord put his finger on when he said, go call your husband. Now, I'm assuming two things here in this story, and I'll have to let you know what I'm assuming so you can evaluate my conclusion. I'm assuming that the sixth hour was new.

I can't see our Lord being tired with a long journey at six in the morning, and I can hardly see six in the evening for certain reasons that this woman would be coming to draw water. I'm assuming it's noon, and this is not the hour that women come to draw water in the evening. They don't come out in the heat of the day to draw water.

You do it early in the morning or late in the evening when it's cool. And she came out at noon. I'm assuming, secondly, the reason she did it was pregnant on the part of the villagers.

In an Eastern village, the time for drawing water, the time like a coffee clash when women get together, you know, and the gossip, why shouldn't they? They talk, and it's like talking over the back fence with your neighbor. You know, the women get together at the well when they go to get their daily water. I'm assuming she came at noon when the other women wouldn't be there.

Why not? I can imagine what happened there were those occasions when she came to draw water, was a little bit late, and the other women were already there, and the conversation was flying, and as soon as she got there, there was a dead silence. And they cleared their throats, and it was a nice day, it looked like it was going to be a nice noon, and after a while she began to get the message. Well, when she got there, there were a few embarrassed glances, and they heard they got their water and left.

She got the message. She got it. They had judged her as unfit for their company because of her sin, and they had condemned not only her sin, but her, and she felt it.

You can't hide this. You cannot hide this attitude of condemnation, and she felt it, and so she started coming at noon. It's easier, it's easier to bear the heat of the noonday sun than the fire of people's judgment, and she would rather come alone at noon and draw her water than come earlier in the morning when the women were going to be there.

So, she avoided them, and now our Lord had to deal with the same issue that these women had dealt with and driven her away. And I can only say, He did it in a non-judgmental way. He did not minimize the sin, but He did not judge her.

This is not the only time our Lord was faced with this issue. Remember in John 8 when the Pharisees brought the woman taken in adultery, and there's an act of our Lord there that nobody has an explanation for. There's no use in my saying I got an explanation for it.

Nobody knows what happened when He knelt down and wrote in the ground. Oh, you can have all sorts of speculations, but since the Pharisees doesn't say what He wrote, you don't know what He was doing, and since nobody knows, my guess is just as good as anybody else's, and I'm going to give you my guess. My

feeling is He knelt down and in sheer embarrassment that these men were so callous, and so insensitive, and our Lord so sensitive, in sheer embarrassment, knelt down with the human hope they would have the decency to get out of it.

We roundly condemn people as well as sin. I'm not sure why. One of the reasons may be if I can judge my own heart, I condemn most roundly the sins that I have the most problems with, and I think half the time I'm trying to convince myself.

The second possible reason for our condemning people is we want the Christian community to know we don't have a thing to do with sins like these, and it ends up we're more interested in our own reputation than we are in the people who have committed them. The truth of the matter is we're all sinners, and our Lord did not have to protect His reputation. He was wrongly judged on more than one occasion.

They called Him a wine-bibbering glutton, and both lied, but He didn't break off His contact with publicans and sinners to protect Himself, and if Pharisees wanted to call Him a wine-bibbering glutton, they were free to misjudge Him and call Him a wine-bibbering glutton, but He wasn't going to neglect sinners. And He didn't have to protect His reputation by roundly denouncing this woman and sending her off the way the women of the village had done. He was non-judgmental.

We are not God. We simply do not know. Only God can judge.

Being non-judgmental does not mean you tolerate sin, but you distinguish between sin and the sinner, just the way that glorious father did in the story of the prodigal son. He would have nothing to do with the far country, but everything to do with the boy who had been there, and when that boy came home, the far country was never mentioned, and our Lord's attitude was so different from the attitude of the village that this woman could go running back into the village and say, come see somebody who told me everything I've ever done. I've had students in my office, and we've been talking about sin, and our Lord's attitude towards sin, and I said, now suppose it should suddenly dawn on you that I know everything about you, I know everything you've done, I know everything you've thought, I know what everything you thought today before you came into this office.

What would your reaction be? I can remember one student saying I'd be out that door without even opening. Well, that does something about me, you know. But here was a woman face-to-face with a man who knew everything about her, and she wasn't afraid.

What is it that John writes? If we walk in the light, that's where everything is exposed. What do we find? Fellowship in the blood of Jesus Christ is unpunishing from all. Not condemnation, not a judgmental attitude.

This is God. This is God. The only time our Lord condemned was the hypocritical Pharisee.

But when our Lord meant this, acknowledged, felt this. Here he is. Come see a man that told me everything I did.

Pretty obvious, pretty obvious he's got a new motive for living. Things are so different. And that's what our Lord wants to do.

This is the way he is to us, this is why he died on the cross, this is the way he wants to reach us. This is his attitude toward us. Oh, thank God for it.

Because I cannot, I cannot take my place with the other women of the village. I have to stand beside this Samaritan woman, and thank God that our Lord's attitude towards me is just that. We sometimes say that this woman was so excited, she ran away into the village and left the water pond.

She forgot all about what she was there for. She came for water and ran away and forgot all about it. And she's not the only one that's excited, so is our Lord.

He was sitting there waiting for lunch and he forgot all about it. And then he came on and said, have some peace, I'm not interested. I'm not interested.

I had something so much better, this has been so much more exciting than my food. But what thrills me is what he goes on to tell the disciples. Fields are white to harvest.

This is my exclusive privilege, he's saying there are people all over the world feeling this sense of guilt, of rejection, of being cast out of society. And you can go into that harvest field and drink the gulf just the way I have been drinking the gulf just recently. It's open to anyone who is here.

I don't know where you are, if you're like the woman, if you come along with me and sit beside that Samaritan woman and hear our Lord's words. Realize that he not only knows all my sin, he doesn't reject me because I'm a sinner, that's why he came. And you can hear his words of forgiveness and cleansing.

Or if you want to stand with the disciples coming out of the village, just open your eyes, there are people all around you, in your assembly, in your neighborhood, might be in your own home, waiting, hoping someone is going to bridge that gulf to them, and not sit in judgment. Can you be that person?

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