

Lesson Four

(John 4:1-42)

The following episode gives us a fascinating glimpse into the social customs which existed during New Testament times, and it provides a useful model for us in our attempts to witness to others about the grace of God. (For an extended discussion of this model, see the essay by Paul E. Little on "How to Witness" in *Tell It Like It Is*, a paperback edited by Fritze Ridenour and printed by Gospel Light Publications.)

¹The Pharisees heard that Jesus was winning and baptizing more disciples than John. (²Actually, Jesus himself did not baptize anyone; only his disciples did.) ³So when Jesus heard what was being said, he left Judea and went back to Galilee; ⁴on his way there he had to go through Samaria.

⁵In Samaria he came to a town named Sychar, which was not far from the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by the trip, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

Why does Jesus leave Judea? John does not bother to make the reason clear. Perhaps he wishes to avoid a confrontation with the Pharisees at this moment in his ministry, or it could be that he does not want to detract from the work of John the Baptist. As with many other such questions in the Bible, we may speculate but we dare not legislate our opinion about the matter.

Orthodox Jews normally crossed over to the eastern side of the Jordan River and then travelled north, thus avoiding the province of Samaria (it was only about 20 miles wide and 30 miles long). For the Jews wanted nothing to do with the Samaritans, whom they regarded as heretical religious and racial half-breeds. This attitude was due to the fact that when most of the Jews were enslaved by the Assyrians in about 722 B.C., a small number of these people remained in this area and intermarried with people brought in from the surrounding idolatrous nations. So the captured Jews never forgave the Samaritans. And the Samaritans were equally angered by the refusal of the returning Jews to let them help rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah).

This split was further widened when the Samaritans built their own place of worship on Mt. Gerizim in about 409 B.C. And although it was destroyed by the Jewish leader John Hyrcanus in about 129 B.C., the Samaritans continued to revere that location. In fact, the "Samaritan Chamber of Commerce" went so far as to claim that it was here that Adam was formed from the dust of this mountain, that it was here that Noah's ark came to rest, and that this was the mountain on which Abraham tried to offer Isaac to God!

And to top it off, the Samaritans were guilty of rejecting all of the Old Testament scriptures except for the books of Law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). So there were ample reasons for animosity between the Jews and Samaritans. Yet Jesus ignores that conflict and chooses to violate Jewish custom by going through the heart of Samaria.

As Jesus and his party march along they reach the edge of the town of Sychar. This town (known also as Schechem, Sichem, and Sychem) had been one of the most important towns in Palestine as early as 2,000 B.C. It was here that Abraham pitched his tent and made an altar during his first visit to Canaan. It was here that Jacob bought a field which later became the burial place for Joseph (Genesis 33:19; Joshua 24:32). It was here that Simeon and Levi killed all the male citizens in retaliation for the seduction

of their sister Dinah. It became one of the cities of refuge (Joshua 21:20-21), and was the spot in which Joshua gave his farewell message (Joshua 24:1-25). It was here that the citizens made Abimelech their king (Judges 9), only to have their city totally destroyed three years later. It was here, when the city was rebuilt, that Rehoboam was made king. It was here that the tragic division between the northern and southern tribes took place. It was this town which was the capital of the northern kingdom, but which was again destroyed and its people enslaved (2 Kings 17:5-6). No doubt Jesus and his companions were familiar with the town's long, if not glorious, history.

The well mentioned in 4:6 was located about one-half mile northwest of the town. It is about 7½ feet in diameter, and is known to have been at least 105 feet deep with about 15 feet of water. It is here that Jesus, hungry and tired, decides to rest. The stage is set, then, for a remarkable event.

⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw some water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink of water." (⁸His disciples are gone into town to buy food.)

⁹The woman answered, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan — so how can you ask me for a drink?" (Jews will not use the same cups and bowls that Samaritans use.)

¹⁰Jesus answered, "If you only knew what God gives and who it is that is asking you for a drink, you would ask him, and he would give you life-giving water."

¹¹"Sir," the woman said, "you don't have a bucket, and the well is deep. Where would you get that life-giving water? ¹²It was our ancestor Jacob who gave us this well; he and his sons and his flocks all drank from it. You don't claim to be greater than Jacob, do you?"

¹³Jesus answered, "Whoever drinks this water will get thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks 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 which will provide him with life-giving water and give him eternal life."

¹⁵"Sir," the woman said, "give me that water! Then I will never be thirsty again, nor will I have to come here to draw water."

In John 6, Jesus performs a miracle in order to feed several thousand people who had come out in the wilderness to hear him. But here his disciples must go to a nearby town to buy groceries. Perhaps this should tell us that we cannot expect God to do something for us which we are quite capable of doing

ourselves. In any event, the disciples are gone and Jesus strikes up a conversation with a Samaritan woman.

What's so unusual about that? Two things: she was a *Samaritan* and she was a *woman*. No Jewish male, and especially no Jewish teacher, would degrade himself by socializing with either! Some of the more fanatical Jews even thanked God each day that they had not been born a Gentile or a woman. But by his actions, Jesus accepts her as an individual, as a person worthy of courtesy and respect. And wherever Christianity has gone, the status of women has been lifted and social prejudices have been erased. But occasionally we need Paul's reminder that "there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free men, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

The woman was understandably surprised, therefore, when Jesus asks her to give him a drink of water (4:9). But that is nothing compared to how shocked she will be when she discovers who she is casually talking with (4:10). Wouldn't you be a little unsettled to find out that you had come face to face with the Son of God and had not even recognized him?

She hears his comment about giving her life-giving water, but she puts two and two together and decides that he must be joking. He didn't even have a bucket. And even if he did, he surely couldn't show her a better or more dependable water supply than this very well which had been in service hundreds of years.

Pointing toward the well, Jesus reminds her that its waters can only produce temporary satisfaction. A businessman who was flying on a commercial jet was asked by the stewardess if he would like to have a cocktail or some other drink. He smiled, then leaned over and whispered, "No, thanks. I've got something *better*." The stewardess grinned and asked, "What could that be?" And the businessman beamed, "Jesus!" The Samaritan woman, like that stewardess, is about to learn that there is something that will both satisfy her thirst and give eternal life. And she responds by admitting her desire for something better (4:15).

¹⁶"Go and call your husband," Jesus told her, "and come back."

¹⁷"I don't have a husband," she answered.

Jesus replied, "You are right when you say you don't have a husband. ¹⁸You have been married to five men, and the man you

live with now is not really your husband. You have told me the truth."

¹⁹"I see you are a prophet, sir," the woman said. ²⁰"My Samaritan ancestors worshiped God on this mountain, but you Jews say that Jerusalem is the place where we should worship God."

²¹Jesus said to her, "Believe me, woman, the time will come when people will not worship the Father either on this mountain or in Jerusalem. ²²You Samaritans do not really know whom you worship; but we Jews know whom we worship, because it is from the Jews that salvation comes. ²³But the time is coming and is already here, when by the power of God's Spirit people will worship the Father as he really is, offering him the true worship that he wants. ²⁴God is Spirit, and only by the power of his Spirit can people worship him as he really is."

²⁵The woman said to him, "I know that the Messiah will come, and when he comes, he will tell us everything."

²⁶Jesus answered, "I am he, I who am talking with you."

²⁷At that moment Jesus' disciples returned, and they were greatly surprised to find him talking with a woman. But none of them said to her, "What do you want?" or asked him, "Why are you talking with her?"

²⁸Then the woman left her water jar, went back to the town, and said to the people there, ²⁹"Come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done. Could he be the Messiah?" ³⁰So they left the town and went to Jesus.

Jesus deliberately shifts the conversation to an intensely practical and personal level as he forces her to examine her own heart. Whatever else this woman was, she was honest enough not to pretend to be something she was not (4:17). But she was a person with a fragmented family life, having been married five times previously. (We are not told, and so must not dogmatically assume, that the five marriages were terminated for sinful reasons. Perhaps each husband died. We just don't know.) But her current relationship was both unlawful and sinful.

She is flustered by the fact that Jesus has such detailed knowledge about her life and so, not wishing to linger on that subject, she draws Jesus into the hotly debated question of where people ought to worship (4:19-20). She expects Jesus to give the standard Jewish arguments in favor of Jerusalem.

However, Jesus astounds her with the announcement that — since God is spirit — very soon people would be able to worship him in any location. He touches some important principles of worship: (1) Worship should not be confined to a certain building

or location; (2) Worship is powerless without the Holy Spirit; (3) Worship must be directed toward what God wants, not toward what pleases us; (4) Worship involves preparation, knowledge, and understanding; (5) Worship results in harmony between the human spirit, the Holy Spirit, and God; and (6) the object of our worship is a spiritual being. From the writing of Genesis to the completion of the book of Revelation involved a period of hundreds of years. During this time God slowly revealed more and more of his nature to mankind. So it is that the Old Testament is filled with anthropomorphisms or figures of speech in which the writers speak of God's face, hands, arms, etc. But we are now able to understand that God is spirit.

We cannot say how much the woman understands of Jesus' words, but she rests on her belief that the Messiah will put it all in focus when he comes. Surprise! "I am he," Jesus says. And with those simple words he honors this peasant Samaritan woman by revealing his true identity. It has been said that the most valuable sermons often take place where one person is the preacher and one person is the congregation. Sometimes, as here, a simple, heart-to-heart talk is best.

The returning disciples don't really approve of the scene before them, but none of them is willing to reprimand Jesus for speaking to her. And while they stand there frowning, Jesus finishes his conversation. The woman, so happy and thrilled that she forgot why she had come to the well (4:28), goes back to town and tells them about Jesus. Her witness emptied the town (4:30)! Each Christian needs to be an enthusiastic witness like the Samaritan woman. The New Testament mentions about 40 people who were healed by Jesus, and of that number 34 were either brought to Jesus by friends or Jesus was brought to them. The same percentage probably holds true for spiritual healing, as well.

³¹In the meantime the disciples were begging Jesus, "Teacher, have something to eat!"

³²But he answered, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about."

³³So the disciples started asking among themselves, "Could somebody have brought him food?"

³⁴"My food," Jesus said to them, "is to obey the will of the one who sent me and to finish the work he gave me to do. ³⁵You have a saying, 'Four more months and then the harvest.' But I tell you, take a good look at the fields; the crops are now ripe and ready to be harvested! ³⁶The man who reaps the harvest is being paid and gathers the crops for eternal life; so the man who plants and the

man who reaps will be glad together. ³⁷For the saying is true, 'One man plants, another man reaps.' ³⁸I have sent you to reap a harvest in a field where you did not work; others worked there, and you profit from their work."

The disciples show concern for Jesus' physical condition by urging him to eat with them, but he tries to teach them another spiritual lesson by explaining that his "food" is to obey God. And by his reference to the "fields" ready for harvest, it may be that Jesus simultaneously gestures toward the great numbers of people already coming toward him (4:30), most of whom wore light-colored clothing due to the high price of dyes.

³⁹Many of the Samaritans in that town believed in Jesus because the woman had said, "He told me everything I have ever done."

⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they begged him to stay with them, and Jesus stayed there two days.

⁴¹Many more believed because of his message, ⁴²and they told the woman, "We believe now, not because of what you said, but because we ourselves have heard him, and we know that he really is the Savior of the world."

What happened at the town of Sychar illustrates what Jesus taught in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-23). Although some did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, a great number did. And their belief was a result, initially, of the "seed" planted in their minds by this humble woman. Jesus said, "And the seeds sown in the good soil stand for those who hear the message and understand it: they bear fruit, some as much as one hundred, others sixty, and others thirty" (Matt. 13:23). That's what makes preaching and teaching so exciting!

Thought Stimulators on John 4:1-42

1. Why did Jesus leave Judea?
2. Who were the Samaritans?
3. Name three events which took place in Sychar.
4. What does this story tell you about the physical needs of Jesus?
5. What social customs can you think of that keep people apart in today's world?
6. What is the "life-giving water" that Jesus offers?
7. Discuss the dangers of having a "church-building complex," i.e., the notion that worship can only be done there.
8. Define "worship" in your own words, *then* compare it with a dictionary definition.

9. Put two columns on a piece of paper (or the blackboard), with the headings of "Acts of Worship" and "Acts of Service." List as many things as you can under each, then discuss whether they overlap.
10. What does "Messiah" mean?
11. Illustrate from your own experience how "one man plants, another man reaps."
12. To whom are you indebted for helping you to be a strong Christian?
13. Share with the class how other people, particularly strangers, have tried to witness to you.
14. Just as Jesus used the opportunity to teach the Samaritan woman, be on the alert this week for an opportunity for you to tell someone about Jesus.