

John 4:1-26

**Narrator:** Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John—although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her:

**Jesus:** Will you give me a drink?

**Narrator:** His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.

**Samaritan woman:** You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink? [*turning to the congregation*] For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.

**Jesus:** If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.

**Samaritan woman:** Sir, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?

**Jesus:** Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

**Samaritan woman:** Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.

**Jesus:** Go, call your husband and come back.

**Samaritan woman:** I have no husband.

**Jesus:** You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.

**Samaritan woman:** Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.

**Jesus:** Woman, believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.

**Samaritan woman:** I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.

**Jesus:** I, the one speaking to you—I am he.

As you may know, even though there aren’t any live fans in the seats, the Major League Baseball season started a little over a week ago, and the NBA season re-started on Thursday. The NFL camps have started conditioning too. Who knows what the college seasons will look like but this reminded me of one things that changed the course of fall sports.

In 1965, the University of Florida Gators football team had a problem. Practicing and playing football in the Florida summer and fall heat was wearing down their players. Quite frankly, regular water wasn’t enough. So to help their team stay hydrated and energized during practices and especially during the second half of their football games, some doctors and scientists at the university came up with a drink that

would help the players' bodies store carbohydrates and then efficiently release the carbs' energy during extended physical exertion. When they won their first Orange Bowl over Georgia Tech the next year, the Florida Gators credited their "Gator-ade" with contributing to their second half success, and so did their opponents' coach. They basically took water, and made it better, something that gave them a little more. The University of Florida sold their Gatorade to a beverage company and the sports drink industry was born.

The point is though, that every human being has a common and consistent need for water and hydration, and there are times when some things can fill that need better than others. And this most basic of human needs is where Jesus meets this Samaritan woman. **In this passage we first see that Jesus meets this woman on common ground, this common need that they both have for water. Then we see how Jesus used this common need to help her see how he is the solution to her more important needs.**

In verses 4-6 we see that Jesus is also very **literally** meeting her on "common ground". This is the land that Jacob had given his son Joseph in Genesis 48. The well is actually still there today, about 100 feet deep, and it's near the ancient site of Shechem where Abraham first built an alter to the Lord. So this land was significant to both the Samaritans and the Jews - it had a history that goes back even before their time in Egypt, way back to the beginnings of both groups with Abraham and his grandson Jacob and great-grandson Joseph.

And then, connecting directly with the **human** needs of this woman and every other person, we see the human side of Jesus in vs 6 - he was tired from his journey, and probably dehydrated as well, so he sits down by Jacob's well in the heat of the day. And when a woman comes to draw water, Jesus asks her for a drink. Underneath the long history of cultural and religious conflict between the Jews and Samaritans, they both still have the same human need for water.

But there's more going on here than just a little physical thirst. As our passage says, Jews didn't associate with Samaritans. And in that day, Jewish men generally didn't even speak to single Jewish women, much less discuss theology with Samaritan women. They especially didn't ask them for a drink, because for Jesus to put his mouth on her water pot would have "defiled" him according to Jewish rules. So this was way out of the comfort zone for the typical Jewish guy.

And from what we know of the social norms of that day, there's even more below the surface. If you were to meet someone of the opposite sex at a local "watering hole" today, what kind of images does that bring to mind? It might not be all that far off from what's happening here. Think back in the OT, where did Abraham's servant meet Rebekah when Abraham sent him to find a girl for Isaac? (by the local well). Where did Moses meet his future wife, after fleeing Egypt? (by a well) Ancient Near East archeological records tell us that the town wells were the place where young men and women would often meet and even get engaged. So are you starting to see this like someone in Jesus' day yet?

Now, add to this that getting water for the family and their livestock was usually the responsibility of the women in the family. But the "good girls" would go earlier in the morning when it was cooler. The not-as-socially-acceptable women would go later to avoid the possible shaming from the "upstanding" townspeople. So, think about this - when this rather "experienced" woman shows up there at the heat of the day, and sees a single man there, sitting at the well, with nothing to draw water - and then this unknown guy approaches her asking for a favor - what is she going to assume that he's there for? What kind of person (what kind of **woman**) might she reasonably assume that he's there to meet???

And she doesn't turn away from this watering-hole conversation either, does she? Look at this conversation in that light. And then, not long into the conversation, Jesus tells her to go and get her husband - how does she respond? "Oh I don't have a husband" - it's entirely possible that **she** thinks he's fishing to find out if she's available.

I was talking last year with a NT professor and author named Gary Burge who has spent his professional life studying the book of John. He explained that from our Christian, Western Civilization backgrounds, we often approach passages like this **theologically, intellectually**. But we don't necessarily

read these passages like a first century middle easterner would. What I've been describing is the type of thing that would have fed into their reading, and especially into the very human, sight & smell & senses way that the Apostle John writes his gospel – he writes how the people *experienced* Jesus and his teaching.

So... Jesus takes all of their common ancestry, their common thirst for water, and maybe even a deeper human need this woman has with all of her checkered past – a need for someone to really want to **know her** – and Jesus met this woman on the common ground of their shared everyday experiences and needs – and THAT's where he starts with their conversation. Jesus did this same type of thing with others who were farther away from God, too, like Matthew and Zaccheus the tax collectors and their friends, with whom Jesus ate supper.

We can learn from this. **Jesus used the common experiences to connect with people, both in practice like this, and in his teaching** – such as using parables about the everyday experiences of life. By doing that he showed that he understood the people's lives, or as Hebrews 4:15 puts it, that he was able to *identify* with us.

But, then Jesus takes the conversation into deeper water. **As this interchange between Jesus and the woman develops in verses 9-15 we see Jesus pushing past some initial resistance to start to address her needs.** In verse 9, she raises some initial skepticism: **“You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?”** She knows that Jews don't associate with “her kind” and the verse reads like she's looking for the typical rejection that she has probably come to expect.

Today too, people may still be looking for Christians to be dismissive of them if they are not Christians, or if there is something about their lifestyle that they think Christians would object to. But it doesn't mean that they don't have questions about spirituality, or about a worldview that actually makes sense of all we're going through, or even some desire to find a place where they can draw closer to God again. But are we willing to meet them where they are?

In verses 10-14 Jesus ties this connection about water into the truth of God's word as it applies very directly to this woman's life. Jesus may have a physical need for water, but this woman needs the rebirth of living water in her life. If Jesus can get her to look beyond her immediate concern, her need for water, and can steer this conversation to the bigger issues of life, then maybe she will see that she needs the living water that only Jesus can give that restores and refreshes and renews and can sustain her through all that life can bring at her.

But it wasn't just her life that needed renewing. This topic of “living water” was a long-running theme in the history of God's relationship with his people. There was a constant need for renewal there. Jeremiah 2:13 speaks to the trouble that the nation of Judah got into when they had strayed from God, **“My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”**

They had turned away from God's leading and direction, his living water, and they had tried come up with their own way of living – a way that they thought made the most sense to them by the human wisdom in their day and setting. But that way didn't work out so well. **Problem was that, instead of their way of life giving them “living” or fresh running water, it was more stagnant like water from a cistern. Their life wasn't refreshed and renewed and strengthened by their faith and beliefs, instead it became more stagnant and less pleasant as time went on.** Like the woman at the well, their beliefs and their way of life wasn't working out well in the long run.

That's something we see today too. People think their lives will be better without God. But the choices that people make based on values that differ from Jesus' values, those decisions may seem like more fun in the short run, they may even seem more fulfilling or “wiser” by human standards in the short run - but in the long run, the consequences of those decisions tend to accumulate in ways that slowly make life more and more lonely, and more limited, and more difficult over time - like it had for this woman who had been through a string of relationships.

In Jeremiah 17:7-8,13 the prophet brings up the contrast in the lives of those who have God's living water and those who don't. "But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green.... Lord, you are the hope of Israel."

Do you believe that's true? That God's way leads to something better? Some people are pretty quick to bash Christianity these days, but just as a worldview, as a way of looking at life, what does Christianity offer? How is it relevant to the deep needs of people today? Well, here's just a short list:

To start with, it *makes sense out of the world around us*, and here's a little of what I mean:

- It explains how both evil and good can co-exist in the world, without denying that either or both exists.
- It explains the balance between our personal responsibility for the things we can control and the fact that there are some forces bigger than us that we can't control.
- It explains the existence of a universe, that is incredibly complex, yet so perfectly ordered, balanced, and interdependent
- It explains not just the physical universe, but why humans have always known that there is something more, there is this spiritual dimension both within us and out there beyond us.
- It offers an explanation for all the events that go beyond scientific explanation, without denying the importance of science as a means by which we understand God's creation.
- Not only does it *explain* the world around us but it gives us a way to *cope with it* – for example, yes there is evil – but there is also the promise of the ultimate victory of good over evil, so we can have hope.
- Not only hope for the ultimate victory of "good", but hope for our *personal* ultimate good – an eternity in heaven, a place that our souls long for where there is no evil, but only the good in life.
- We have the assurance of an all-powerful God who IS ultimately in control AND who has our best interests at heart.
- We also have a reason to believe **we are worth** something – we are valuable because God made us valuable – in his image – and he considered us valuable enough to die for.
- Not only does it help us cope with life, but Christianity and the Bible give us **direction** on how to live a good life.
- We have a real purpose in life. Not only is life in general not random, but OUR LIVES need not be random pursuits of temporary stuff that we can't take with us after we die.
- Christianity also leads to real personal depth – not just spiritually but also emotionally, and also depth of understanding. Christianity fosters the good in us - personal maturity, deep understanding of people and their motivations.
- Christianity also provides a rational basis for understanding how we should live in society in ways that make life the best for everyone.
- And it provides reasons WHY it is rational and good to behave in **unselfish** ways, Darwinism's survival of the fittest doesn't provide that.
- And Not only reasons, but **motivation** to do good that goes beyond selfish or even societal reasons.
- It provides a deeper basis on which to value people – not just their money, or looks, or athletic ability - but on their inherent value, and their growth as they become more like Christ

And finally, Christianity shows us how to NOT be *manipulated* by other people and possibly their selfish motivations – instead we get a family of people to go through life with. A family of people to

support us, and encourage us, to lift us up when we're down and to help carry us through the tough times. A place where we are known and accepted and loved – not perfectly of course, and we all need to keep working on that, because that IS what Jesus called his church to be.

You see – we DO have something to offer this world. Our faith IS relevant to our lives today. That was just a short list, and we could all add more to it from our personal experiences. And that's exactly what we need to do – we need to share those common ground experiences with the people in our lives, and we'll talk more about that next week. But when they look at us and see these things, then they will see how relevant Christianity can be to their daily lives and what it has to offer.

And, you see, if we are people whom others have learned they **can trust** because they have some connection with us; and if they **can see** in us the effect of this kind of “living water” from our relationship with God; and if **they know** that we have some good knowledge about the Bible and how it makes sense out of life, then we too may be people who can really make a difference in their lives, who can be a spiritual resource for them, and help them find their way closer to God.

And we do that by connecting with people on the common ground that we all share. Sometimes it's by our example as we go through some of the same typical life experiences and challenges. If we can share the frustrations we're going through, then others can see the reality of how our faith helps us through them. We all have frustrations with our kids or parents, our jobs and finances, our spouses or girlfriends or boyfriends, that's common ground... and we can share how God helps us cope with, and work through, those challenges in a healthy way.

For this woman at the well, it was her relationships. After she expresses interest in this living water that Jesus has to offer, Jesus brings up her living situation. No, he's not hitting on her. And even though he's well aware of her history, he's not going to reject her because of it. But this has hit on a more sensitive need in her life. She's been through 5 guys and is living with someone else now.

When we lived in Flagstaff, instead of getting married, people would typically go through a series of 2-5 year “long-term relationships”. But by the time they were in their mid to late 30's, they weren't as young and attractive and fun anymore. And they had a lot of emotional and relational baggage from the failed relationships. And so did the other people who were single out there. And by the time they hit 40, they'd look around, see some of their old friends with settled lives, 15-year marriages, with kids, and careers, and stable homes – and they'd realize how far away from that they were.

So it doesn't surprise me that the Samaritan woman is maybe trying to deflect Jesus' very personal questions about her life in vs 19-20. “Yeah, let's change the subject - you're obviously some kind of prophet. But you Jews have your way of worshipping in Jerusalem and we Samaritans have our way on Mt. Gerazim, here where the people worshipped God when they first entered the Promised Land.”

**But Jesus doesn't drop it, and he doesn't get lost in the less significant things that we Christians sometimes like to spend our time and energy on.** The real issue isn't **where** she worships, Jesus tells her, it's **how** she worships – it's worshipping the true God in spirit and in truth, with authenticity. **She needs God in her life. He's the only relationship that can really fill her deepest need - to know Him, and to be fully known with all her scars and baggage and yet to be truly loved anyway.**

The woman gives one last effort to turn the conversation aside in vs 25 – it's like she's saying, “Sure, you sound good mister, but I've heard a lot of talk before. But if you're really on the level, then you know as well as I do that the Messiah is coming and he will make all the confusing stuff of this life and religion all clear to us.” And Jesus removes her last objection – “I who speak to you am he.” Actually, in the Greek he uses the name that God gave to Moses, a spiritual father common to both Jews and Samaritans, when he says to her, “I Am – is the one who speaks to you.”

Jesus is the one with the answers, he is the truth – the best revelation we have about who God is and how God seeks to relate to us. And he is the answer to the deepest needs we have, and the deepest needs of those around us.

We can all keep trying to find the answers for ourselves, people have been doing that since Adam and Eve - but they won't hold water in the long run. We can try to satisfy our needs with temporary fixes of the stuff of life around us, but it will get stagnant. We can even try to kind of brush Jesus aside and say that we'll get around to him later – but the only answers that will truly satisfy us are from the truth of his word, and from the leading of his Spirit – it's as true today as it ever was. Jesus is still the best answer, and knowing him is the greatest gift we can ever give someone. Let's go to him in prayer.