



Social to Save

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Our Lord Jesus cared infinitely for individuals. In John's Gospel we have no public sermon of the length of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount but we do have approximately nineteen interviews with individuals. Such encounters with the Master are in their records a repository of great riches. Let us consider just one of them — the encounter with the Samaritan woman.

Opposition and Narrowness

Have you noticed the series of contrasts between John 3 and John 4? One is the story of an encounter with a Jew, the other with a Gentile. In one instance Jesus speaks with a man, in the other it is a woman. The first occurs by night, the second by day. Nicodemus is of spotless reputation but the woman is despised even by her own kind. With the Pharisee Jesus seems hard and abrupt in the vein of the law of Sinai, but with the Samaritan outcast he is distinctly different in approach. He does not tell her that she should be born again but instead offers her a great gift. The emphasis is clearly grace, not law.

As we approach this story let us keep in mind that the Gospel as a whole is an indictment of the unbelieving Jews. Every miracle in the book tells of their lost estate. They were without joy (Jn 2); without health (Jn 4); without strength (Jn 5); without spiritual nourishment (Jn 6); without security (Jn 6); without the light of truth (Jn 9) and without life (Jn 11). In 1:19, 26 we see a blinded priesthood, in 2:3 a joyless nation, in 2:14 a desecrated temple, in 3:7 a lifeless Sanhedrin. Now in chapter 4 we read the tragic words, "The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans" (v 9). Intended by God to be priests to the whole world they had hardened into an elitist society proud of their barriers. Their song might well have been:

We are the chosen few
All others will be damned,
There's no room in heaven for you,
Heaven can't be crammed.

Too many Jewish prayers, however high-sounding they were, by the time they reached heaven could be reduced to this vein:

God bless me and my wife,
My son Jacob and his wife,
Us four, and no more, Amen.

Let Christians beware. John, while describing Jews, is addressing believers in Christ. He is saying in effect: "the greatest religionists of history failed. Beware lest you follow in their wake." All four gospel writers make it clear that Jesus and the Jews were almost totally agreed about doctrine, but they had a different view of God. The Pharisees had made God in their own image: cold, austere, legalistic. But Christ's God was in his image, the image of the man who received sinners and ate with them. The beloved disciple in chapters three and four of his Gospel accordingly illustrated approaches that can be made to Jew and Gentile according to their spiritual estate and after Christ's manner. Let us now look more closely at the manner in which the nonreligious are to be sought.

Jesus Meets an Unbeliever

Observe that the chapter opens by telling us emphatically that Jesus himself did not baptize. He commanded baptism and endorsed it, but left the work to others. Right at the introduction to this encounter we are thereby reminded that outward ordinances and theoretical creeds are not the primary things about the gospel of Christ. No outward form guarantees salvation.

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How beautiful to read that the Creator of all things was weary with his journey (v 6). We should always remember that Jesus was just as much man as though not at all God, yet just as much God as though not at all man. It is interesting that John who has so much to say about Christ's divinity also stresses his humanity. Do

not, however, identify humanness with sinfulness. Sin was no part of original humanity. It is an intruder and no stain of it marred the perfect nature of the second Adam.

The well reminds that water is ever made the symbol of the blessings of grace. Yet Sychar means "purchased." That which comes to us "without money and without price" was purchased by the blood of

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Christ. By the symbolic waters Christ offers the gift of eternal life to one who apparently did not even merit continued existence in this life. And Christ is there purposely in order to make the offer of grace. That is why he is first at the well, and why he also is first to speak. Unless he draws us, we can never leave the old life. "We love him, because he first loved us."

The encounter took place at noonday. The wise Bishop Ryle cannot resist warning ministers at this point to heed this "beautiful carefulness to avoid even the appearance of evil." The woman, unlike Nicodemus, is not interviewed in the isolation of darkness. Too many men pray "lead us not into temptation" and then speedily make off in that direction.

But even more beautiful is Christ's tact in asking a favor. "Give me a drink" he requests, startling a woman to whom no decent Jew would speak. In the

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verses that follow, observe the Master soul winner at work. He uses all the laws of the mind that he himself instituted. We see him using the psychological principles of attention, interest, desire, conviction, visualization, action. All of life is composed of warp and woof, the former being the situation as it is thrust upon us and the latter our own weaving of change into that situation. From the woman's own thoughts and needs Christ selected the images and concepts that would weld desire and conviction into ultimate saving choice.

The heart of Christ's revelation must be given our chief attention. "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (vv 13-14). Scripture says God has placed eternity in men's hearts. (We use men, of course, generically. Women in fact responded much more fully to our Lord. Not once in the Gospel record does a woman speak against Christ. Would it were true of the other sex as well!) Augustine referred to this when he said: "Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

Read Ecclesiastes which is one long commentary on the truth Christ gave about the thirst of the soul. "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" declares the opening

of the book. This is the truth when we live "under the sun." It is wonderful to find the parallel introductory passage in Solomon's succeeding book. It reads: "The Song of Songs" (Song 1:1). In that volume we find the reason for the new song. "My beloved is mine and I am his," "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine," "I am my beloved's and his desire is for me" (2:16; 6:3; 7:10). For life with all its weal and woe is just our chance of learning love.

Christ is here affirming that satisfaction can only come from the gospel. All else, unless subordinate to the good news of grace, cheats us. The soul finds that possession brings indifference. Nothing is as good in the hand as in the head. It is sad that we take a lifetime to learn this lesson, that only after dissatisfaction, frustration, and despair do more sinners turn to drink of the heavenly fountain. In ancient times God had taught the same lesson from Sinai when he warned men of the precipices of life by the Ten Words which began with our relationship to him and finished with our relationship to things. When we put first what God puts last we invite sorrow and pain (Mt 6:33).

Conviction of Sin

The woman of Samaria would rather argue doctrine than have her soul surveyed, and so it is today. We mistake creeds for deeds, and beliefs for love. For that reason, the Master showed the woman her sin and then her Savior. "You have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband," but nevertheless "I who speak to you am he" — the Christ (Jn 4:18, 26). None can drink of the water of life until they have known the convictions of sin, guilt, and grace that this ancient Samaritan experienced. "For there is no difference. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:22-23). But put with that indictment the passage which begins with the same words: "For there is no difference...the same Lord is rich unto all them that call upon him" (Rom 10:12).

Is not the recurring conviction of sin part of that thirsting to which Christ alluded? Those who find nothing without wherewith to fill and satisfy their souls also find the same story when searching within. We are as bereft of value as the world itself. One old writer commented on John 4:13,14 as follows: "Let me

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say in a word what I feel. You will find nothing either in heaven or in earth, with which you will be satisfied and feel supplied, except Jesus Christ alone, with all that fulness of the Godhead which dwells in him bodily."

And Poole adds to the words of Rollock thus: "He who receiveth the Holy Spirit and the grace thereof, though he will be daily saying Give, give, and continually desiring further supplies of grace, yet he shall never wholly want, never want any good thing that shall be needful for him."

The first draught of the living water the woman requested of Christ was conviction of sin. None can

value the physician until he feels his disease. Until time merges into eternity and until this corruptible puts on incorruption we need that ministry which Paul described in Romans 7. "It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure." "If it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin" (Rom 7:13,7).

Christ frequently upsets before he sets up. He afflicts before he comforts and convicts before he converts. Some want another way like the pilgrims who in **Pilgrim's Progress** climbed over the wall only to

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be lost at last. How could we ever enjoy solace unless we had sorrowed, rest unless we had worked, justification unless we had known guilt?

The Universals of Christianity

Notice how Christ's thrust towards the close of the conversation summarizes the relationship between old and new truth. "The hour is coming when neither on this mountain (Gerazim) nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father...salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth,

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for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and

truth" (Jn 4:21-24). Salvation is of the Jews, yet the sacred Jewish places are no more. Whatever is limited to geographical sites has no meaning in the Christian era for Christ has taken away the sin of the world, not just of Judea.

Christianity is a universal religion and only "universals" can prevail in it. Worship, spirit, truth, law, sin, salvation — these are the "universals" Christ sets forth in this sermon for the new age. Judaism

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contained all of them, but in addition it had typical rites limited to the temple. The former remain, but the latter have passed. Christ by fulfilling fills full. Not the oldness of the letter but the new wine of the Spirit characterizes the everlasting gospel. It does not diminish one jot or tittle that which has always been truth but it offers now through Calvary the only lever which can move the world.

From Christ's insistence upon the themes of sin and salvation and from his refusal to be drawn into controversies over secondaries we may learn much. Arthur Pink summarizes admirably at this point:

"What a lesson is there here for every Christian worker respecting the manner to deal with anxious souls. When we are speaking to such, let us not occupy them with questions about sects and parties, churches and denominations, creeds and confessions. It is positively cruel to do so. What they need is salvation — to know God, to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us shut them up to this one thing, and refuse to discuss anything else with them until they have received the Savior. Questions about church membership, the ordinances, etc., have their place and interest; but manifestly they are not for convicted sinners. Too many are so foolishly anxious to swell the ranks of **their** party, that they are in grave danger of thinking more about getting people to join **them** than they are about leading anxious souls simply and fully to Christ. Let us study diligently the example of the perfect Teacher in his dealings with the woman of Sychar." (**Exposition of the Gospel of John**, vol. 1, p. 205)

And so say all of us! □