

“It’s Always Harvest Season”

John 4

Of all the Gospels, John’s gospel is probably the most carefully crafted gospel. He uses the number 7 many times (most likely as a memorization tool). He contrasts ‘light’ and ‘darkness’ continually in the gospel. And he places and compares characters side by side so that we see the difference. One of the most obvious examples of this is in John 3 and 4. In John 3 it’s Nicodemus; the named, respected, self-righteous, serious, searching well-off Pharisee who comes to Jesus initially as if they are spiritual equals wanting to discuss theology, but at night. In John 4 it’s the Samaritan woman; the unnamed, disrespected, culturally unclean, indifferent, flippant, most-probably poor, Samaritan woman who encounters Jesus in the middle of the day. From a human perspective you couldn’t paint a more opposite picture. It is not a coincidence. John pairs these two together to remind us that both in the eyes of God are really the same and we often don’t see them that way. And neither of them are easy to reach for Jesus yet both would come to faith.

We could certainly learn how to reach both of them with the gospel but for this morning we’ll only focus on the Samaritan woman. Yet as we look at both these testimonies – which is what they are – we need to understand that it’s always harvest season in the eyes of God. According to Jesus’ own words here in John 4 spiritual sowing and reaping can happen at the same time. And I think most of us need to have a biblical, mental shift in the way we think about reaching others for Christ. Let’s dig in to see what we can learn here about reaching the lost with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

At this juncture in Jesus’ ministry, He has been preaching and healing in the Jerusalem area and He’s attracting a lot of attention – not all popular. The religious leaders notice Jesus is becoming more popular than John the Baptist – and they weren’t very happy about him. V.3 says

When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

But in between Judea and Galilee is Samaritan country. For a modern day example, it’s like the West Bank or Palestinian territory. It wasn’t uncommon for Jews to cross the Jordan and travel up the east side avoiding Samaria, but here we read

⁴ Now he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

Who were the Samaritans? Back in 722 BC when Assyria took the Northern Kingdom of Israel captive, they didn’t take everyone but left behind the poor, the elderly, those who they didn’t feel would contribute to their productivity. However, the Assyrians sent some of their own people to populate the Samaria area (being the capital of the NK) and in so doing these intermarried with some of the Jews from the north. Now, however, they were considered half Jews and there was a great divide between them and the rest of Israel.

Since the Northern Kingdom already was spiritually drifting from God’s truths, the Samaritans developed their own religion over time that venerated the Patriarchs and Moses. They only followed the Pentateuch and they believed Mt. Gerezim not far from Samaria, was their holy mountain – not Jerusalem.

So every Jew knew this and made up their minds about all Samaritans – that they were people devoid of the truth and not interested in learning the truth about God. But this is one of the main points Jesus wants to teach His disciples – then and now. And that is

Don't Assume People are Uninterested in God **(4:27; 9)**

The disciples left Jesus to go to a Samaritan village and buy some food. When they come back why are they surprised Jesus is talking to her? Culturally it's a no-no. But didn't Jesus say He was going to make His disciples 'fishers of men'? The word for 'men' there is the general term for humanity 'mankind'. If Jesus meant only men He would have used a different Greek word that referred to males specifically. The disciples (wrongly) assume Samaritans in general are lost and not interested in the truth. And sadly, the status of women was awful in Jesus' day. By talking to a Samaritan and a woman, Jesus teaches us that all people are to be valued since we are all uniquely made in God's image, however marred by sin. So here's something all of us need to do:

Get rid of our stereotypes (v.9)

We all have them about different groups of people. Could be a culture or a religion or a race or a sex. Why do we have stereotypes? The media of course plays a big role in this. Every-thing we see, hear and read online or TV is chosen by someone for us to see. They present the angle they want us to see. They cause us to paint people groups, religions and cultures with a broad stroke. So that means we need to be seeing and reading other venues so we have a balance.

Secondly, we have stereotypes based on personal experience. Any negative experiences with different people can taint the way we see all of them. The most obvious example of this in our own recent news are police officers. A few bad apples made some terrible choices in how they treated people. Now 'all' police officers are brutal, terrible people. Well of course they are not. We've all met officers who are excellent people. We've all had positive experiences with people of other cultures and religions. Last week we had missionary couple sharing pictures of the people they serve and are trying to reach. People who are mostly from a religion that is often portrayed as cruel and insensitive. But that's the sensational and minority glimpses that the media wants us to see. We saw friendly faces of ordinary people trying to make their way in the world who need Jesus. The disciples had grown up with many stereotypes and Jesus is helping them see the world through God's' eyes.

John the writer inserts, in parenthesis in v.9 that Jews didn't associate with Samaritans. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a classic illustration. When the 'lawyer' was asked by Jesus who was the neighbour to the beaten man, he refused to even say 'Samaritan', he could only say, "The one who had mercy on him." So because of stereotypes the disciples never saw the Samaritans as people who they needed to reach. What stereotypes do you and I have about certain people? Who do we assume are not interested in God? Jesus is telling us don't do that.

Okay, so how do we build bridges to people we simply know little about? Jesus helps us here as well:

Find shared needs or interests (vv.6-27)

When the disciples left they probably took the leather water bucket that you would roll up and tuck away when not in use. Jesus is thirsty and needs a drink and asks this woman if she would serve him.

There are a hundred cultural faux pas Jesus is doing here. Rabbis were not supposed to talk to women in public. To accept water from her leather water pouch would also be considered unclean. She might have actually wondered if Jesus wanted something more than water from her – why else in her mind would a man be openly talking to her in public?

The woman comes alone at the 6th hour (noon) to get water, obviously to avoid other women. The cultural thing to do for Jesus, a man, was to withdraw Himself from the Samaritan woman in silence while she finished getting her water. Jesus bypasses cultural commentary and says to her,

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."

Living water was a euphemism for a spring as opposed to well water. Jesus uses a common need for water and puts some spiritual bait on a hook. She also knows He is intimating that He is a special Jew so she flippantly says 'You think you're better than Jacob who gave us [not true ☺] this well?

Jesus offers her 'living water' which she mistakes for a spring, meaning for her she doesn't have to go to the well at noon avoiding people anymore. And Jesus knows this because He knows what's in the hearts of mankind. So He asks her 'Go call your husband and come back.' When she says 'I have no husband' Jesus already knows this and [I believe without judgment but with compassion] says,

You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸ 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."

He uses their common need of water to spark a spiritual conversation. He intimates He can do something Jacob couldn't which, as we'll soon find, is offer eternal life and forgiveness of sins.

Many of us have been given the impression she was an immoral woman who avoids everyone else and Jesus points out her sin. I'm not convinced. If she was an adulteress, why would other men marry her? Why hadn't she been stoned to death (which is in the 5 books of Moses)? And if she is so immoral why did the townspeople listen to her because normally a man would not listen to a woman's advice or report (check the disciples who didn't listen to the women's report that Jesus had risen from the dead [Luke 24:11]).

The fact that she was married 5 times probably means some of those husbands died. A woman could not initiate a divorce. She may have been divorced 5 times by men and/or she may have lost a number of husbands to death. Either way the people would still avoid her because she was either unclean or was just bad luck. And so who would want to marry her again? Some suggest she was probably an older man's servant who needed someone keep his house and feed him. They probably had an arrangement. She wasn't immoral, rather she suffered all her life with these multiple marriages that led to death or unacceptance. No children are mentioned so one wonders if she may have been barren. Another social stigma. She was probably a woman who has suffered most of her life, who Jesus will now redeem her suffering and use it to save many in her community.

As we think about the disciples (and ourselves), they are totally unaware Jesus is having this spiritual conversation with this woman. When they return they are shocked and totally clueless about her need for Jesus. But we would all be more spiritually sensitive if we would learn to

Trust God to prepare hearts for us to meet (vv.19-26)

This is what Jesus was doing and will point out that the disciples will reap what they didn't have to sew for. All my siblings and their spouses and children are unsaved. In my praying for them I have often felt unnecessary guilt that I haven't been more forceful in sharing the gospel. I have erroneously believed at times that if I don't lead them to Christ who will? The answer is, lots of people! God has shown me over the years that He has placed other believers in their path. That there have been other ways and people through whom they may have heard the gospel. Like the disciples, I fail to trust God to be preparing people's hearts beforehand to hear the gospel so that you and I may actually be primed by God to be the reapers.

We must not assume then that people are uninterested in God. God has made us unique. He has wired everyone to search for joy and purpose in life and He has made it so that nothing other than Himself will satisfy us. So even that in itself is preparatory work in helping people know that the things of this world cannot bring true peace or purpose. In their searching God uses us to help water the seed or even reap the fruit of their salvation.

The other reason the disciples failed to see this woman as a gospel possibility is because they were stuck on their own agenda. As disciples of a Rabbi, the Rabbi would and could ask His disciples to serve Him by performing various tasks. They were told to prepare the upper room for the Passover. They were told to go into the villages with the gospel and cast out demons, heal the sick. They were told to gather fish and bread for the multitude. Here they were told to go into town and get some food. But when they come back none of them asked Jesus about His conversation with the woman (wouldn't you have?). All they are thinking is their task of getting Jesus food.

We Need to Give our Agenda Over to God **(4:8, 31-34)**

When the disciples ask Jesus to take some food He responds *'I have food to eat that you know nothing about.'* And they respond *'Could someone have brought Him food?'* We can get so caught up in our agenda or something we need or want to do, we miss opportunities to be a witness for Christ.

Remember, people are more important than 'ministry' (vv.31, 33)

They've known and been with Jesus for at least a year by now. Everything Jesus does is intentionally God-directed and Biblically-centered. Why wouldn't one of them at least think to ask, *'Hey Jesus, were you talking with her about God too?'* None of them asks about this 'unusual' conversation Jesus had with her. Even something like *'What did you say to her that made her forget her water jar?'* They actually ignored her and didn't think this was something they should have known about. They were doing what Jesus asked. They were involved in ministry. But here's something else we need to be careful of:

Don't use 'obedience' as an excuse not to do what God really wants (vv. 8, 32, 34)

What did Jesus ask the disciples to do? Go get some food from the Samaritans. Now, let's realize that this was not as easy as it sounds. Because of the animosity between the two they may not have wanted to do it, but they did. They may have been harassed and mistreated, but they did it. They returned believing they did what Jesus wanted. Never realizing that maybe while you were buying food from Samaritans that you would actually engage with them, see them as real people who need forgiveness of sins and saving. Do we think like that? Do we think about the people we may encounter at a store or at the garage or whoever might serve us that day as needing Jesus and

seeing them as real people, needing to hear their forgiven or for the most part are we too focused on our agenda – sometimes even ministry stuff – and forgetting about what people need.

In speaking with the woman, Jesus uses their common bond in worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but He also makes no apology when He tells her salvations comes from the Jews – in other words, from all the truth God gave the Jews; not just the books of Moses. She understood from Deut. 18 that the Messiah would come one day and explain “everything to us”. Jesus replies ‘I am Him and I just did!’ She leaves to tell her townsfolk, who (again) are being prepared by God to hear the truth for themselves even though the disciples don’t know this is coming. Jesus gives them a heads up in v.34

³⁴ “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. ³⁵ Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. ³⁶ Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. ³⁷ Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. ³⁸ I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.”

And the Samaritans are coming toward the Jews – not usually a good sign! But here it’s because they want to meet Jesus for themselves. This is the harvest Jesus said the disciples were unaware was happening all around them. Could it be happening now around us and we’re unaware or too focused on ourselves to notice? Let’s change the way we think about how difficult it is to reach people for Christ and instead, start believing what Jesus says:

Believe Jesus When He says a Harvest is Always Ready **(4:34-42)**

Many believed what she said (v.39). The disciples were on their way to Galilee to do ministry! They don’t even realize that there is ministry opportunities in front of them because of stereotypes and cultural fears. Jesus said I planted, the Samaritan woman is the first fruits of the harvest and now she’s planting and the harvest is coming to you. The disciples get it and end up staying two days in Sychar with Samaritans. Eating their food, Drinking their water. Staying in their homes!

This is what happens to people when they get saved. Barriers come down. Fears disappear. Hearts are open. And people worship together in spirit and truth.

Jesus said there’s always a harvest ready to be reaped. What if we started to pray for God to help us be ready to reap a harvest today if that’s His plan? Or at least pray we are less concerned with our agendas and more concerned with God’s while we go through our daily routines and appointments?

We’re saved for a reason. There are people in your life that God wants you to connect with to share Christ. We accepted the gift of eternal life when someone else shared Jesus with us. That’s the Holy Spirit filled food that energized Jesus to do the will of God. If we want to be filled with the Spirit and truly sense His energizing power, share the gospel. And when you reap a small harvest of even one, that’s plenty to energize you to do more of God’s will.

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