



## God Seeks People to Worship Him in Spirit and Truth

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John 4:16-26

If people are spiritually asleep you have to shock them, startle them, scandalize them, if you want them to hear what you say. Jesus was especially good at this. When he wants to teach us something about worship he uses a whore. "Go call your husband!" "I don't have a husband." "That's right. But you've had five, and the man you sleep with now is not your husband." She was shocked. We're shocked. But Jesus simply sits there on the edge of the well with his hands folded, looking at the woman with razors in his eyes ready to teach us about worship.

The first thing we learn is that worship has to do with real life. It is not a mythical interlude in a week of reality. Worship has to do with adultery and hunger and racial conflict. Jesus is bone-weary from the journey, hot, sweaty, thirsty—and he decides: "Yes, even now, just now I will seek someone to worship God—a harlot, a Samaritan adulteress. I will show my disciples the worship that my Father seeks and how he seeks it in the midst of real life from the least worthy. She is a Samaritan. She is a woman. She is a harlot. Yes, I will even show them a thing or two about how to make true worshipers out of the white harvest of harlots in Samaria."

Let's go back to the beginning, John 4:4-6. "Jesus had to pass through Samaria on his way to Galilee. 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, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about noon." Before we meet this woman who comes to the well, recall who Samaritans were. They were the remnant of the northern Jewish Kingdom who had intermarried with foreigners after the chiefs and nobles had been carried into exile in 729 B.C. They had once built a separate worship place on their own Mt. Gerizim and they rejected all of the Old Testament except their version of the first five books of Moses. The animosity toward Jews was centuries old.

Jesus walks right into this hostility, sits down and asks for a drink (v.7). The woman at the well is amazed that Jesus would speak to her. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Instead of answering her directly, Jesus shifts the focus of her amazement up a level. He says (in v. 10), "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." Jesus says that the really amazing thing is she is not asking *him* for water. He calls it *living* water and he calls it the "gift of God."

But the woman doesn't rise very high. Her background has not made her a prime candidate for spiritual insight. She was more like the three guys behind Karsten and Benjamin and me at the Twins game on Thursday who kept saying how full of beer they were and arguing endlessly like five year olds about whether Eisenreich should have tagged up on third base. She was simply enslaved to the flesh. Her spirit was dead. She simply says (vv. 11-12), "How can you give me water when you don't have a bucket? And if you want me to drink water that doesn't come from Jacob's well, then you must think you're greater than Jacob. Well, if this water was good enough for Jacob, it's good enough for me." She's not on Jesus' wavelength yet at all.

So Jesus again lifts the level of amazement (vv. 13-14): "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." The amazing thing is not just that I can give you water without a bucket, but that the water I give takes away thirst forever and, even better than that, it will turn you into a spring that brings eternal life to yourself and others.

What did Jesus mean? Proverbs 13:14 says, "The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life." Perhaps then Jesus meant that the wisdom he gives satisfies the soul and turns a person into a fountain of life. Perhaps the water is his teaching. But the closest parallel to verse 14 is John 7:37-39, "Jesus stood up and proclaimed, 'If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Now this he said about the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive." Just like John 4:14 this passage speaks of a drinking in and a flowing out. But here John makes plain that Jesus is speaking about the Holy Spirit. It's the presence of God's Spirit in your life that takes away your frustrated soul-thirst for ever and turns you into a person who overflows with life for others instead of sucking up other people's life like sandy soil.

But probably both these answers are true—that Jesus' *teaching* satisfies your thirst and makes you a fountain of life, and that the *Holy Spirit* satisfies your thirst and makes you a fountain of life. Jesus kept the word and Spirit together. For example, in John 14:26 he says, "The Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said." The work of the Spirit of Christ is to make the word of Christ clear and satisfying to the soul. When we come to Christ to drink, what we drink is truth—but not dead, powerless facts. The Spirit and the Word unite to slake our thirst and make us a fountain of life. (See 1 Thess. 1:5; 2:13.) The word of promise and the power of the Spirit are the living water offered to the Samaritan harlot.

I hope this encourages you as much as it does me. Sometimes I feel so dead and so sinful that I don't see how I can be of any use to the church any more. But up 'till now God has always come to me at those times and graciously shown me something like this—the hope that a worldly, sensually-minded, unspiritual harlot from Samaria can become—not just saved (which would be wonderful enough)—but a *fountain of life*. She can be used to *give* life. And I take heart that if I just turn from my sin and keep drinking at the well of Jesus' words, I may still be of some use to this congregation. And so can you if you just drink deep at the right well.

I think that's what Jesus wanted her to see. But harlots and beer-bellied baseball fans have hardened their spiritual senses so deeply they can't taste what Jesus means. So she says (in v. 15), "Sir, give me this water that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw." Beware of

giving up on people too soon. This woman seems hopelessly carnal. She can't see beyond her physical senses. But Jesus aims to make her a worshiper of God in spirit and truth.

So now he touches the most sensitive, vulnerable spot in her life—"Go call your husband." The quickest way to the heart is through a wound.

Why does Jesus strip open this woman's inner life like this? Because he had said in John 3:20, "Everyone who does evil hates the light and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed." Concealed sin keeps us from seeing the light of Christ. Sin is like spiritual leprosy. It deadens your senses so you rip your soul to shreds and don't even feel it. But Christ has set his sights on this woman's conversion. So he lays bare her spiritual leprosy. "You've had five husbands and the man you're sleeping with now is not your husband."

Now watch the universal reflex of a person trying to avoid conviction. She has to admit in v. 19 that Jesus has extraordinary insight ("You're a prophet!"), but instead of dealing with her guilt she tries to suck Jesus into an academic controversy: "O, so you're a prophet, well, where do you stand on the issue of where people ought to worship?" Verse 20: "Our fathers worshipped on this mountain; and you [Jews] say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." A trapped animal will chew his own leg off. A trapped sinner will mangle his own mind and rip up the rules of logic and discourse. "Why, yes, as long as we're speaking about my five husbands and my adultery, what is your stance on the issue of where people should worship?" Brothers and sisters, that kind of double-talk and evasive, verbal footwork is very common. And texts like this incline me to think that wherever I hear it someone is hiding something. If your conscience is clean reason can hold sway; if it's not, you will be instinctively irrational.

It's interesting, though. Jesus never goes back to the issue of adultery. It was a thrust against the sealed door of her heart. But now his foot is in and he is willing to take the very issue she raised and use it to finish his saving work. She raised the issue of where people ought to worship, Jesus responds by saying, "That controversy can't compare in importance to *how* you worship and *whom* you worship." *How* and *whom* are vastly more important than *where*.

Verse 21 turns her attention from where to how: "Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.'" In other words, it is not the location that makes an act of worship authentic. Worship is not merely an external act that you can accomplish by going to a place. Jesus said in another place (Mt. 15:8): "This people honors me with their lips but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me." Worship is first and foremost an experience of the heart. Prayer without heart is vain. Songs without heart are vain. Confession and creeds and liturgies and sermons that don't come from the heart are empty and worthless in God's eyes. So Jesus says to the woman: Don't get hung up on irrelevant controversies. *How* you worship is vastly more important than *where*.

Then verse 22 introduces the question of *whom* you worship. "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews." When all our efforts to be gentle and sensitive and respectful of another person's religion are done, the time eventually comes when you have to say: Biblical worship is true worship and yours is false. That will often be thrown back in your face as a statement of arrogance. But it isn't. If there is truth, and you have bowed humbly before it, then to try to persuade another person to

bow with you is not arrogance. It is love. The Samaritans rejected all the Old Testament except for their version of the books of Moses. Their knowledge of God was deficient and so their worship was deficient. And to tell them so was as loving as telling a person with lung cancer to stop smoking.

So in verses 21 and 22 Jesus directs the woman's attention away from the external question "*where*" to the internal question "*how*" and the theological question "*whom*." Worship must be vital and real from within and it must be based on a true perception of God. Now verse 23 sums this up with the key phrase "in spirit and truth": "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." The two words, spirit and truth, correspond to the *how* and the *whom* of worship. Worshipping in *spirit* is the opposite of worshipping in mere external ways. It's the opposite of formalism and traditionalism. Worshipping in *truth* is the opposite of worship based on an inadequate view of God. Together the words "spirit and truth" mean that real worship comes from the spirit within and is based on true views of God. Worship must have heart and worship must have head. Worship must engage your emotions and worship must engage your thought. Truth without emotion produces dead orthodoxy and a church full of unspiritual fighters. Emotion without truth produces empty frenzy and cultivates flaky people who reject the discipline of rigorous thought. True worship comes from people who are deeply emotional and who love deep and sound doctrine.

Therefore, as a pastor I agree with Jonathan Edwards when he said, "I should think myself in the way of my duty, to raise the affections of my hearers as high as I possibly can, provided they are affected with nothing but truth, and with affections that are not disagreeable to the nature of what they are affected with." I think of it something like this: The *fuel* of worship is the truth of a gracious, sovereign God; the *furnace* of worship is your spirit and the *heat* of worship is the vital affections of reverence, fear, adoration, contrition, trust, joy, gratitude, and hope.

But something is missing from that analogy, namely, fire. The fuel of *truth* in the furnace of your *spirit* does not automatically produce the heat of worship. There has to be *fire*, which I think is the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus says in v. 23, "True worshipers will worship the Father in *spirit* and truth," some take him to mean "in the Holy Spirit." I've taken him to mean that worship must come from *your* spirit within instead of being merely formal and external. But in John 3:6 Jesus connects God's Spirit and our spirit in a remarkable way. He says, "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." In other words, until the Holy Spirit touches our spirit with the flame of life our spirit is so dead it does not even qualify as spirit. Only that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. So when Jesus says that true worshipers worship in spirit he must mean that true worship only comes from spirits that are made alive and sensitive and vital by the touch of the Holy Spirit.

So now we can complete the analogy: the *fuel* of worship is the grand truth of a gracious and sovereign God; the *fire* that makes the fuel burn white hot is the quickening of the Holy Spirit; the *furnace* made alive and warm by the flame of truth is our renewed spirit; and the resulting *heat* of our affections is worship, pushing its way out in tears, confessions, prayers, praises, acclamations, lifting of hands, bowing low and obedient lives. Notice verse 34. When his disciples come back with food Jesus says, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." The work of God is to seek real worshipers. Jesus was sent to accomplish this work. Therefore we should see the whole interchange with the

Samaritan woman as the work of God in Jesus seeking a real worshiper. In verse 35 Jesus applies his example to us, "Do you not say there are yet four months and then comes the harvest? I tell you, lift up your eyes and see how the fields are already white for harvest." There is a white harvest of harlots in Samaria. I have just made one into a real worshiper. That's why the Father sent me, so send I you. God seeks people to worship him in spirit and truth. Here comes the city of Sychar white unto harvest. If you love the glory of God make ready to reap.