

John 4.1-45, NKJV

Needs and Values

Paul Bailey

This whole of this passage is about needs and values. It begins with Jesus need; his need to move through Samaria, his need for rest, his need for refreshment and above all his need to build a restorative, redemptive relationship with this woman at Sychar's Well. The passage centres around types of thirst and types of water, it addresses the human need to worship, and ends with the disciples need for food and Jesus' craving for the 'meat' of his Father's will. Then there is the urgent need of a valuable harvest.

There is no way to fully address all of the issues raised in this text. In fact I am not going to address the issue of living water and the Spirit, or worship and the temple, not because these themes are not important but because I believe that these themes are really a backdrop to the incredible drama that is unfolding in this text. This story is about values; it is about what matters and why. So I really want to ask and attempt to answer one basic question: that is, why? Why did Jesus need to pass through Samaria when most devout Jews would have avoided the area, to the extent of extending their travel-time by going around Samaritan territories? Why did Jesus engage this particular woman in this particular conversation; especially when speaking to this woman forced Jesus to breakthrough a number of significant socio-religious, moral and cultural barriers?

New Testament Commentator and Theologian Leon Morris, comparing Nicodemus in Chapter 3 with this Samaritan woman in Chapter 4, notes:

"Nicodemus was an eminent representative of orthodox Judaism. Now John records an interview Jesus had with one who stood for a class that was wholeheartedly despised by orthodox Judaism. From the point of view of the orthodox Jew there were three strikes against her: she was a Samaritan, a woman, and a sexual sinner."¹

	Chapter 3	Chapter 4
	<i>Nicodemus</i>	<i>Samaritan Woman</i>
Place	Jerusalem	Samaria
Gender	Male	Female
Time	Night	Noon
Occasion	Formal meeting	'Chance' encounter
Content	Ultimate concern (Being born again)	Immediate concern (Water)
Initiator	Nicodemus	Jesus
Ethnicity	Jew of the highest pedigree	Samaritan, half-breed Jews, considered to be racially inferior
Social Status	Aristocrat/Rabbi/Leader	Social Outcast
Attitude	Serious/polite	Flippant suggestive or flirtatious
Form	Dialogue to monologue	Dialogue

¹ Leon Morris, cited in *Notes On John*, Dr. Thomas L. Constable, p.65, 2008 Edition Online PDF

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Religious Conviction	Deeply committed Pharisee	Immoral- a sexual sinner, heterodox, irreligious
Education	Highly educated Rabbi	No textual evidence but it was forbidden to teach torah to women
Result	Open-ended/undecided?	Converted ²

The first barrier that Jesus breaks through is a racial/cultural barrier. Jesus as a Jew engages a Samaritan in a conversation. This is so rare as to be considered unheard of and absolutely taboo. There was a deep-seated racial hatred and animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans that went on for centuries. Commentator Thomas L. Constable helps us understand some of the reasons for this, Constable notes that:

“Politically Samaria was part of the Roman province of Judea in Jesus' day. Nevertheless culturally there were ancient barriers that divided the residents of Samaria from the Jews who lived in Galilee and Judea. Wicked King Omri had purchased the hill on which he built Samaria as the new capital of the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 16:24). The name Samaria eventually came to describe the district in which the city stood and even the whole Northern Kingdom. After the Assyrians captured the city and terminated the kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C., they deported the substantial citizens and imported foreigners who intermarried with the remaining Israelites. Most of these foreigners continued to worship their pagan gods (2 Kings 17—18). The Jews who returned to Jerusalem after the Exile regarded the residents of Samaria as racial half-breeds and religious compromisers. The Samaritans resisted Nehemiah's attempts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 4:1-2). They built a rival temple on Mt. Gerizim opposite Shechem about 400 B.C., which they dedicated to Zeus Xenios. John Hyrcanus, the Hasmonean ruler of Judea, destroyed it and Shechem about 128 B.C. These actions all resulted in continued hostility between the two groups.”³

Phil in his message on the parable of “The Good Samaritan” told us that “In Jesus' time the Jews hated the Samaritans, and the following is said to be true:

- Marriage between Jews and Samaritans was illegal
- Jews would not pass through a Samaritan town
- Samaritans were not allow to sacrifice in the temple
- A Samaritan could not serve as a witness in the Jewish courts
- Samaritans were publicly cursed in their synagogues
- A Samaritan could not be converted to Judaism as a proselyte
- Samaritans were excluded from the after-life
- There was a saying that said ‘He who eats the bread of a Samaritan is like one who eats the flesh of swine’

² Adapted from David S. Dockerty, *Reading John 4.1-45, Some Diverse Hermeneutical Perspectives*, *Criswell Theological Review* 3.1 (1988) 127-140. Copyright © 1988 by The Criswell College.

³ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes On John*, p.66, 2008 Edition Online PDF

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- To call a person a “Samaritan” was considered to be a deeply offensive insult (John 8.48)⁴

Yet John tells us that “must needs go through Samaria” (KJV) notice the double imperative in “must” and “needs” Why did Jesus need to go through Samaria? Some say that going through Samaria is the most straightforward and direct route to Jerusalem; however, we know that most devout Jesus would avoid passing through Samaritan towns. I want to suggest that for Jesus the imperative to go through Samaria was not geographical nor even about minimizing travel time but the reason “he needs must” go through Samaria was because he was driven by a much deeper value: this Samaritan woman, who was a sexual sinner mattered profoundly to Jesus.

Not only did Jesus break through the racial divide to engage this Samaritan woman but he challenged deep-seated prejudices and cultural norms regarding gender relations. In ANE culture it is considered extremely taboo for a man to conduct a private conversation with a woman who is not a close relative. In fact in some middle-eastern cultures it is such a taboo that family members would consider this action to be a deep violation of family honour. Yet here is Jesus conducting an intense discussion with a woman at a well. The fact that this encounter takes place at a well is significant because it collecting water from a well was considered to be “women’s work” and there the well at this time of day was considered to be women’s territory: yet here is Jesus sitting on this well have a conversation with this Samaritan woman.

This encounter is even more unthinkable because there was a long-standing Jewish tradition that effectively forbade the teaching and discussion of Torah with women. The ancient Rabbis said: “Anyone who teaches his daughter Torah, it is as if he taught her *tiflut* (silliness, licentiousness).” In fact the 1983 musical film, *Yentl*, starring and directed by Barbara Streisand is based around this tradition. Jesus, the Rabbi, breaks through gender taboos in order to have an intense theological discussion with this woman.

The other barrier that Jesus breaks through is perhaps the most pervasive and insidious barrier of all: it is the moral divide. It is clear from this text that this woman was considered to be a sexual sinner, in fact it is Jesus who puts this particular card on the table when he says, “Jesus said to her, “**You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!**” (John 4.17-18). There is no prejudice like the prejudice of people who believe themselves to be morally superior to others. The arrogance of people who believe themselves to occupy the moral high ground is both astounding and cruel. All evil actions from murder to genocide have been perpetrated by people who believed they had the moral right to commit these acts. It is not by accident that this encounter is with a woman, because women have often found themselves at the violent and bloody end of so-called moral superiority. A woman is called a whore, a hussy, or even the pseudo-polite phrase “woman of ill-repute” for allowing hypocritical men to have their ‘way’ with them. Men can often leave the scene of sexual sin without a trace or blemish on their reputation or standing the community whereas women are hounded, terrorised, stigmatised and ostracised by so-called ‘morally upstanding citizens’. It is not accidental that this particular woman is collecting water from the well at Noon, most other women

⁴ Phillip Purkiss, *The Good Samaritan*, Sermon Notes, WWW.regenerationproject.com

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would have drawn water from the well before dawn. This woman came at a time when there was likely to be fewer women drawing water. Yet Jesus takes the time to speak to this woman about “the gift of God” and “the living water”

Time and again throughout this passage Jesus teaches us by his actions that the terms and scope of our mission is not to be restricted by prejudices of race or gender, nor by a person’s social status or moral standing within a given community; Jesus teaches us that there is nothing and no one that should prevent a barrier to kingdom-mission. Jesus teaches us that people are so important and the message of the kingdom is so transformational that we must break through any-and-all barriers to engage lost, broken and sinful people in the Word of the kingdom: they are to be included!

For Jesus this is not about effective marketing, nor is this a mass evangelism strategy designed to expand an egomaniac’s pseudo-kingdom. This passage is about how this person, who is a Samaritan woman, is lost and desperate and is supremely important to Jesus, not as a number or a notch on an evangelistic scorecard but because she is: she is valuable to Jesus as a person, a person who the Father wants to restore and to reconcile. This was Jesus “must needs” imperative. It is what drove him into forbidden territory, forced him to put his reputation as a Rabbi on the line and risked alienating him from his own disciples. Jesus did this again and again through his ministry. John 4 is a snapshot of a wider picture. The wider picture is Jesus did not allow taboos and prejudices to determine the parameters of his mission. Folks this is where we must decide what matters to us. You see our values are not what we say on our website or in mission, vision and/or value statements. Our values are what we instinctively, unconsciously, habitually and repetitively do. He question is what is our instinctive, unconscious, habitual and repetitive response to lost people?

The impact of this conversation on this woman is immeasurable. John records the following words as a conclusion to this encounter:

²⁷And at this *point* His disciples came, and they marveled that He talked with a woman; yet no one said, “What do You seek?” or, “Why are You talking with her?” ²⁸The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, ²⁹“Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” ³⁰Then they went out of the city and came to Him.” (NKJV)

The epilogue to this encounter is not just in verses 27-30 when John gives us an insight into the future of this woman and her continuing story; I believe the theological and didactic epilogue continues in verse 31-45 when John tells us:

³¹In the meantime His disciples urged Him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” ³²But He said to them, “**I have food to eat of which you do not know.**” ³³Therefore the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought Him *anything* to eat?” ³⁴Jesus said to them, “**My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.**” ³⁵“Do you not say, ‘There are still four months and *then* comes the harvest’? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!”

In this part of the epilogue John tells us why Jesus “must needs go through Samaria when he records Jesus as saying, “**My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work**” Then John

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has the Master pointing us toward the harvest “Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!”

The epilogue focuses us on the point of this whole encounter, namely that there is a mission on which we are sent and co-missioned with Jesus, the sent-sending God. There is also a harvest of people, lives, men, women and children who are yet to be reconciled with the Father and we are to be focused on reaching these people at any cost. Cannot allow prejudice, taboos or barriers of any kind to prevent us from touching the lives of those to whom we are sent.