

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN - COMMENTARY

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Lesson 4 - John 4:1-54

The Five Stages of the Samaritan Woman's Conversion Jesus Dug a Well in Her Awareness (John 4:1-26)

Samaritans and Jews passionately disliked each other. Like so many ethnic hatreds, the source was political and religious. The destructive stream of hostility may be traced back to the civil war that occurred after the death of Solomon. The northern kingdom of Israel fought the southern kingdom of Judea, resulting in a split between the two kingdoms.

When Assyria conquered the north, the Jewish population intermarried with the pagan Assyrians, diluting the faith of the Jews. The capital of the area was Samaria, which in time gave its name to the whole country. The Samaritans accepted only the first five books of the Bible. They did not consider the books of the prophets to be divinely inspired and they rejected the prophetic emphasis on the Jerusalem temple. Samaria was north of Judea and east of the northern district of Galilee.

When Jesus met the Samaritan woman, he did so in a context of tension. There was historical hostility between the two peoples due to the civil war. There was religious hostility between the heretic Samaritans and the true-believing Jews. There was tension between a man and a woman alone by a well, strangers to each other in isolated and dangerous territory.

To feel the human uneasiness between them in modern terms, we need only think of an Israeli male meeting a Palestinian woman in some out-of-the-way desert place. Strangers in the wilderness, heirs to the historical divisions, they were subject to the wariness that any two such individuals might face when meeting one another by chance. We have no way of knowing how much this tension affected them. Whatever initial misgivings there may have been, Jesus calmed the waters and offered the woman the saving love that would transform her.

In our meditation on this scene, we trace five steps in the conversion of the woman. This will include Christ's pastoral approach and her evolving response.

1. Create a Trust Situation (John 4:7-9). Jesus was tired from his journey and decided to rest by the well while his disciples went into town to purchase food.

A woman came to get water. Jesus dispelled the foreseeable tension by asking her for a drink of water. He was non-threatening. He disarmed her by asking her for a favor. He would ask for a favor before giving her a favor. He offered her control of the situation.

He gave her permission to do what she wanted. She could oblige him or refuse him and unburden her hostilities. She chose the latter approach. She asked him how a Jew could ask a Samaritan for a favor. The gospel does not add the details, but imagination might supply the types of remarks she could have added. “You and your people burned our sanctuaries. You use our names as a curse word. You refuse us hospitality. You physically avoid us as though we were lepers. You claim to love God, but despise us.”

This is the first step in her conversion. Jesus led her to face her inner loneliness and anxieties. He freed her to express herself to him. She became more objective about herself. He moved her toward a new possibility.

2. Recognize the Other Person’s Need—Let That Person Know It (John 4:10-12). Jesus had caught her attention. If she were to understand the gift of God that he was offering her, she would be asking him for the gift. He would satisfy her by giving her living water. Jesus listened to her spiritual longings. He did not reply to her anger. He did not argue with her about cultural prejudices. He saw the shadow that hid her spiritual desires and began the process of sending light into the darkness. In speaking of a gift of God, he touched the universal human eagerness to receive gifts and the deeper human need to receive a divine gift.

His words about living water have two meanings. They refer to running water as contrasted to stagnant pools in desert places. Secondly, they mean waters that satisfy spiritual thirsts. Scripture often used the images of thirst and water when commenting on spiritual needs. “With joy you will draw waters at the fountain of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3). “As the deer longs for the running streams, so my soul longs for you, my God” (Psalms 42:1). Jesus listened to her spiritual thirst and offered her the living water of God to minister to it. Jesus let her know that he appreciated her inmost longings.

Now he gave her a second permission—to misunderstand what he said. She was not quite ready for self insight. She kept the conversation at an objective level. She stayed at the literal meaning of his words. Getting a little playful and more relaxed, she said he had no bucket. How could he give her any water? Loosening up a little more, she asked him if he thought he were a better man than the patriarch Jacob who built this well. The Old Testament has no record of Jacob building this well or any well for that matter, but a Targum based on Genesis 28:10 says that Jacob did dig a well at Haran. (A Targum was originally an oral interpretation of a biblical passage, then was written down and kept in a collection of such sayings.)

Her anger had subsided. Now she is unwinding a bit more. Her potential for change is growing. She sees something likeable in this supposed enemy. The second step in her conversion is occurring. A Christian conversion. A conversion to the person of Christ. She likes him.

3. *Become More Directive (John 4:13-15).* Jesus had put her at ease. He had let her control the situation up to this point, but he now took greater charge of their interaction. He observed that a relationship was emerging. They were no longer two strangers at a desert well, but two persons caught up in a process. Just as he had not reacted to her anger in step one, so he did not respond to her nervous literalism in step two.

He continued to minister to her spiritual need. It was clear to him that she wanted a love that was strong, a love that would never betray her. He told her that he could give her something beyond living water. He could offer her everlasting water, a love that would satisfy her forever. Basically, he told her, “I am indeed greater than Jacob who could only give you a well to satisfy physical thirst. I can give you an everlasting water that will quench your spiritual thirst eternally.” Intuitively, she knew what he meant.

He let her progress at her own pace. She felt accepted by him. He obviously wanted to give her something of great value. He is not threatening. Nor is he a hostile Jew bent on humiliating her. A sense of wonder began to flow through her whole being. Jesus had awakened in her a basic need. Before she could stop the words, she heard herself saying, “Sir, give me this water.”

This was the third stage in her conversion. She wanted the waters of initiation into a community of love. In scriptural and theological language, she yearned for membership in a community of faithful and trustworthy people. This was not explicit in her mind, but it was the substance of her desires.

4. *Confront the Person With the Decision to Be Moral (John 4:16-18).* Jesus determined that she was now ready for the moment of truth. He knew that her thirst had been undermined by a series of infidelities. Their relationship had evolved to the point where he could speak to her openly. He changed his strategy of non-direction to directive behavior. He said that she should go get her husband. Quickly she said she had no husband. Just as rapidly Jesus replied that she was right. She had five husbands already and the man she lived with now was not her lawful husband.

He asked her to face her immoral choices. There would be no religious conversion so long as the moral issues of her life were not confronted. Only when she was ready to give up her infidelities would she discover true love and experience God. Jesus insisted she consider the possibility of “metanoia”-moral change.

Jesus created this crisis event for conversion purposes. He caused an identity crisis in her life. If she emerged from it creatively, she would experience a loss (her old ways of infidelity) and a gain (a new life of trust and love).

As always, Jesus delicately pulled back and let her act freely. She could respond as she chose. He would not coerce faith from her. His shock therapy startled her into calling him a prophet—not just a clairvoyant who mysteriously could read her mind and her past, but a prophet who confronted people with their moral lapses.

She did not want to face that. She dodged the issue. She began to talk about the dispute between Jews and Samaritans as to where authentic worship took place—Jerusalem or at the Samaritan shrine on Mount Gerizim. He wanted a decision. She wanted a discussion. He thought, “Let’s talk about your soul.” She replied, “Let’s talk theology”.

Underneath all of this give and take, the drama of her conversion continued. She cautiously entered the fourth step in the change process—moral conversion.

5. Invite the Person to Faith (John 4:20-26.) Jesus accepted her unwillingness to look directly at her moral life. Her discomfort level was too intense. She needed time to let her new awareness work its benefits for her. Jesus did not press her on her divorces and infidelities. He did not act the roaring preacher, intimidating her with accusations, reviling her for her sins, forecasting hellish consequences for her misdeeds. He simply placed a mirror before her soul. She could see well enough what was there. His very presence was enough to keep the mirror steadily before her. His kindness and patience were sufficient to let her absorb this at her own pace. Jesus was more interested in helping her to believe in the future of love than in making her feel miserable about her past.

He went along with her digression into a religious quarrel. He said that the day will come when people will not worship at either Jerusalem or Gerizim, but will adore the Father in Spirit and in truth. The purpose of religious rituals is thus fulfilled when the worshipers permit the ceremonies, songs and readings to open them to the powerful presence of the Spirit working there. This is worshiping in truth. Thereby one is faithful to the goal of liturgy.

Like all digressions, this was buying time to face the real issue at hand. Jesus had dug a well in her awareness and was summoning forth the waters of faith and love. “Whoever drinks the water I will give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14).

Effectively, Jesus is saying: Come. See. Believe. Love.

He waited in the silence of the desert by a well. He had given her the option for love. There is a time in any relationship when the noise of words should stop. The mystery of a person's inner drama deserves reverent reserve. The glory-presence of Jesus was affecting her. A peaceful quiet enveloped her. There was no push from without, only a gathering drive from within.

Slowly, she found herself saying, "I know that the messiah is coming." Out of her own contemplative thoughtfulness, she spoke from her heart, which is ready to meet that savior. She did want the everlasting water after all. Her inner drive to faith and love has uttered its plea for salvation.

Jesus simply replied, "I am he, the one who is speaking with you." He gave her the love she sought. The expression "I am," which will appear so frequently in John, echoed the word of God to Moses at the burning bush. When Moses wanted to know God's name, God said, "I am." Jesus is God in the flesh. He confided in this woman his most precious secret, "I am." At that moment she came to faith.

This describes the fifth stage in her conversion, her total, personal commitment to Christ, to community, to morality, and to evangelical witness. This last aspect of her conversion is illustrated by her leaving her water pot at the well, going back to her town and preaching the Good News to her relatives, friends, and acquaintances.

Behold the Convert Who Becomes an Evangelist (John 4:27-42)

Jesus amazed her with his insights into her heart. She could have used a psalm verse to explain his power. "You understand my thoughts from afar....Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know the whole of it" (Psalms 139:4). Jesus saw the sleeping person inside her heart. Like a surgeon who sees a disease, but who sees the health that follows when the sickness is cut away, Jesus compassionately turned her away from a disappointing life into one full of meaning.

The apostles returned with the food supplies and set out a meal, but Jesus touched nothing. They urged him to eat. Jesus was still too absorbed in the contemplative moment of the woman's conversation. He had revealed his glory and the woman had received the grace of loving faith. The experience had intensified his evangelical appetite. "I have food to eat of which you do not know" (John 4:32).

When he was ready to talk, he reminded his disciples of the amber fields of grain which they had seen on their northward journey. Those fields were ripe for the harvest. He used the agricultural image to illustrate an evangelization message. Many people were ready for salvation, but there must be evangelists willing and able to bring them the possibility.

In Matthew 9:37-38, Jesus said, “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest.” The evangelizers must remember they are engaged in a divine work. Even the call to evangelize was a work of the Spirit.

This whole section closed like a Greek play with a chorus of Samaritans, the leading lady, the apostles, and Jesus all gathered front and center stage. The Samaritans reported their conversion to Jesus through the preaching of the Woman at the Well. They urged Jesus to stay with them so he could increase their faith and convert those yet to be brought into his community of disciples. The conclusion was like the stirring end of a magnificent drama. They all turn to Jesus and acclaim him: We know that you are really the Savior of the world (John 4:42).

A Model For Evangelization

This conversion narrative is a superb example of person-to-person evangelization. The five steps that Jesus followed are wisdom tactics for all evangelizers. While this is not the only way to do it, it is one that has been modeled for us by the Son of God become flesh. We can adapt it to our situations. We are not likely to improve on it. This is full Gospel evangelizing because the woman is not only converted, but she becomes an evangelizer herself. Jesus has not only given each of us the call to evangelize in our baptism, he also has shown us a sensitive and compassionate method for doing it.

The Cure of the Nobleman’s Son (John 4:43-54)

Jesus loved Galilee.

After all, there is no place like home.

Jesus returned to Cana in Galilee where he had performed the wine miracle, the first sign and revelation of his glory presence among us. A royal official from Capernaum heard he was there and came to ask him to heal his son who was dying. Just as when his mother had asked him to help the wedding couple, Jesus at first resisted performing a miracle. He decried the fact that unless people saw signs and wonders, they would not believe.

Jesus meant that the astonishment a miracle engendered often captivated people’s curiosity and satisfied their taste for the sensational and the startling. But it did not necessarily lead them to faith in him. God made the same point to Moses, “Despite the many signs and wonders I will work in the land of Egypt, the pharaoh will not listen to you” (Exodus 7:3-4).

The nobleman persisted in his prayer to Jesus, “Sir, come down before my child dies” (John 4:49). Jesus assured him his son would live. Later that day, the nobleman set out for home. His twenty mile, overnight journey took him across the Galilean hills and down the road to Capernaum. Servants met him before he arrived home.

They told him the joyful news that his son was healed. It happened at 1 p.m. the previous day—just when Jesus told him his son would be all right.

This was the second sign whereby Jesus revealed his glory presence. John writes, “[The nobleman] and his whole household came to believe. (John 4:53). The purpose of the sign-miracles of Jesus was to call people to faith in him. In the first sign at Cana, Christ’s disciples began to have faith in him. In the second sign at Cana, a nobleman’s family also came to believe in him. Miracles do not always solicit faith. If people stop at the thrill a miracle causes they will simply regard it as they would a dog dancing or an acrobat balancing a glass of water on his head. If they probe further and obtain a hint of the glory-presence of Jesus reaching them through the miracle, they will be prompted to faith.