

Jesus's chat with the lady at the well. John 4:3-42.

This story addresses racism, class, damaged personality, society's view of ethical standards but more importantly, repentance, salvation and witness.

Who were the Samaritans? They lived in a section of Israel that in the Old Testament was called the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Previously, this area had been invaded by the Assyrians, 2 Kings 17:5-6. They not only conquered it, they carried away all the top and skilled people off to Assyria. The vacuum was filled by the Assyrians with others from neighbouring districts, including Babylon. These people didn't worship God, so God sent lions to kill them. 2 Kings 17:25:29. These people were hybrids, not direct descendants of Abraham but intermarried with the Israelite remnant and they had a hybrid religion.

When the Jews returned to rebuild Jerusalem they were met by Samaritans who offered to help but were snubbed and so the Samaritans tried to frustrate the rebuild. Ezra 4:1-6. Antipathy between both sects reigned for nearly 500 years thereafter and was widespread and ingrained.

The Jews were unapologetically racist; they believed they were God's chosen race and wouldn't even eat with gentiles, Acts 10:28, Galatians 2:12. This, despite there being no such instruction within the Torah (Old Testament). But when it came to Samaritans, well they were a different subspecies altogether, they wouldn't even talk to them, let alone have any business dealings with them. In turn the Samaritans were just as racist as the Jews, Luke 9:51-53.

Jesus seemed to have no problems with the Samaritans, in fact there was only the one occasion, Luke 9:51-53 where He hit problems. Can you think of any other interactions with Samaritans? 10 lepers, Luke 17:16 and the parable of the good Samaritan, Luke 10:33.

Of course there's this meeting with the woman at the well. John 4:3-42. The story is set in a city called Sychar, which is close to Shechem which was the capital city of Israel, up until King David invaded and annexed Jerusalem into Israel. It was once again the capital following the split between Judah and Israel, after the death of King Solomon. Shechem has since been renamed Nablus which is in the West Bank and under Palestinian control.

V3-6. Introduction. Jesus and His disciples had walked from Judea to Sychar, we're not told where in Judea, but if it's say, Jerusalem it was 30 miles or two days' walk. The story starts about 12:00 noon, approaching maximum temperature.

V7-8. The disciples had gone into the city of Sychar to buy some provisions. This in itself would have been highly irregular, Jews don't go into Samaritan shops, so I'm guessing that Jesus had already had stern words with them on the subject. Jesus was no racist, which was later confirmed by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3:28. So Jesus was left alone at the well, just outside the city; parched but with no vessel to lower into the water at the bottom of the well.

Along comes a lady with the requisite vessel and so Jesus quite reasonably, asks her for a drink of water from the well.

V9. His request takes her by surprise. She was obviously Samaritan, she was a local housewife from the city but she instantly recognised that the man asking her was Jewish:

not sure how, maybe His accent, Matthew 26:71. She was incredulous that this Jewish guy was talking to her at all. Nevertheless, rather than telling Jesus to, get lost, you're a Jew, like 90% of her peers would, she just questions why He's deigning to ask her.

V10. Jesus doesn't want to go down that road: so there's a 180 degree change in the direction of the conversation, Jesus has changed from being the requester to an offerer, only He's offering the gift of God, Romans 5:15; He calls it, 'living water'.

V11-12. What does she think 'living water' is? If it's in the ground but she wonders how Jesus is going to extract this living water?

I'm thinking she might be thinking at this point, that Jesus is chatting her up here, and I think she's receptive to what she believes in her mind, is this man's advances, and so she's going along with this conversation, seeing where it's leading to. [See verse 17, 'I have no husband,' not, I have no husband, but can I bring my partner? Maybe she's ruling out any impediment of them 'getting together'.] Her answer to Jesus's claim of 'living water' is, her 'suitor' has a hard act to follow, she tells Him, that this is no bog standard run of the mill well here. No, this well was dug by no lesser man than Jacob, 3000 years earlier - now beat that pal!

V13-14. Jesus goes into more detail on the concept He's trying to get across. He tells her that water quenches thirst, but only for an hour or two. He has something that will quench thirst forever. So, assuming Jesus isn't talking about H₂O, what is He referring to? John 7:37-39. Whenever the Bible talks metaphorically about water, it's generally referring to the Holy Spirit. Can you think of any other every day essentials in which God gives you a Heavenly equivalent, that lasts forever? Treasure, food and human affection.

V15. Obviously, what Jesus is talking about went straight over her head. She's still talking about actual water, H₂O.

V16-18. Jesus asks to meet her husband and she replies, no she hasn't got one. He remarks, clever answer that; no, you haven't got one, you've got 5, and the bloke you're with now, you're not even married to. Note, Jesus's diplomacy. He loved her and didn't want to condemn her. A barrister once told me, he never asks a question that he doesn't already know the answer to. He wants to trip the defendant up and expose him / her as a liar. That was not Jesus's intention, so instead of chastising her, saying, 'you lying cow, you've got five husbands and the guy you're with, you haven't bothered to marry.' Had He adopted that approach, He would have instantly alienated her, and that would have been the end of that.

No, instead He praised her honesty, which shows His love for her, not wanting to alienate her. This woman's soul was more important to Jesus than her sin. Is this not Luke 6:37 in action?

This tells you that she's either very unlucky in love, or more likely, that she's unliveable with, a very troubled soul. Maybe a troubled or abusive childhood or her first marriage has damaged her; we're not told. But it's probably true that she's sought men's affection in the form of promiscuity but because of psychological barriers, she was unable to return any deep affection and so she would just move on. She was probably at the well at 'off-peak time' (when it was hot) to avoid the berating insults she'd get from the women if she came during the earlier, cooler, peak time. She was probably very unpopular with the women of the city and the men would have viewed her with some disdain, as just a good time girl,

easy with her favours. This poor woman, was probably a misfit within the city.

Religious leaders would shun her on two counts, 1) she was a Samaritan. 2) She led a promiscuous lifestyle. Read Luke 7:36-39. But to Jesus, this woman was damaged and he wanted to heal her psychologically and give her everlasting life.

V19-20. The penny drops, this is not just another random player trying to seduce her with weird chat up lines. No, this is a man of God. So now she tries to ingratiate herself by 'talking all religious'. She asks Jesus, who was right, the Samaritans or the Jews?

V21-22. The answer Jesus gave her was that Samaritans worshipped God but they didn't know Him and that salvation was through the Jewish faith but shortly, God would roll that out to the whole world. He was quoting Isaiah 2:2-3.

V23-24. Who are the true worshippers? What does spirit and truth mean in this context (small 's' in the KJV and n)? 1John 4:6. What is truth in this context? John 14:6. I am the way, the truth and the life. For the Father is seeking such to worship Him. Question: why do you think you're here at this Bible study? Verse 24 is almost a command.

V25. She still hasn't quite got it, this isn't a latter day prophet here, the guy before her was much bigger than that! She hasn't made that connection between this man and 'the Christ'.

V26. So Jesus reveals Himself to her. He tells her plainly.

V27. Enter the disciples. They're shocked to see Jesus chatting to this unaccompanied woman, concerned about His reputation.

V28-30. The woman leaves her pot to run back into the city to tell the men (the local women weren't speaking to her) that she's met a man who she suspects might be Jesus, the Messiah. She still isn't quite sure is she?

V31. The disciples were keen for Jesus to eat.

V32-33. Jesus assures the disciples, He's got already food, and they're puzzled as to where He got it from.

V34. Why does Jesus equate food and drink with following the will of God? What's the connection? John 6:35.

V35. Clearly, Jesus isn't talking about agriculture here; so what is His point? Witnessing, winning souls for Jesus, or more than that. Once won, they need encouragement, prayer, teaching (Bible Discussion Group) and ongoing love and encouragement.

V36. In the context of this passage, what's the difference between sowing and reaping? What wages and fruit do you get from labouring in the harvest?

V37-38. Jesus isn't quoting anything from the Old Testament here, but He is quoting from the New, 1 Corinthians 3:6-8. Again, look at that word, reward. Who are the 'others' that Jesus refers to?

V39. Within an hour or so of meeting Jesus, this woman was out witnessing. If I put myself into her situation, I wouldn't have left Jesus's side, I'd want more and more of Him, but no,

something inside this woman inspired her to break off, and go and tell as many people as she could about her chance meeting with Jesus. Many were convinced but more were not so sure and so,

V40-42. The men decide to check this out and off they trot to the well. They hear Jesus and are convinced and persuade Him to stay for a couple of days.

Note the irony of this story. It was the woman that planted the seed and it was Jesus that reaped the reward, which is in keeping with the parable of the sower.

Lessons -

Do not allow your faith to be a cloak for your racist bigotry or an attitude of moral superiority over others.

Jesus loves all sinners and despite Him being in a much better position than you are to judge, He didn't.

When you meet with Jesus, that should give you an imperative to share the Gospel.