



John 4:1-18 (and beyond)  
 So That You May Believe: John  
 “Imperfect People Welcome Here”

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In his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey tells a story<sup>1</sup> about a friend of his who met a prostitute who was in dire financial straits. **His friend asked the prostitute, “Have you gone to a church for help?” She said, “A church – why would I go there? They'd just make me feel worse.”** That is the perception that a lot of people have of the church – if you are going to go there, you’d better be perfect, you’d better gussy yourself up, hide your imperfections...because church is not a place for people with problems. Now, you and I know that’s backwards: First you come to Jesus, you become a part of his community, and then you are changed. But oftentimes our words and our attitudes communicate the opposite. And this misconception keeps many people away from Jesus.

As we pick back up in our journey through the Gospel According to John, today's Scripture passage makes it clear that anyone is invited by Jesus to follow him, and anyone can be transformed by the grace of God when they follow him. But perfection is not required to begin that journey. Let’s dive into **John 4:1-18**.

So, this Samaritan woman ends up at a well at the same time Jesus is there looking for a drink of water. There are a couple of cultural things going on here that will help us understand this passage. **First of all, Jews and Samaritans didn’t get along.** The Samaritans were half-Jew, half-Gentile in terms of bloodlines. They came about after the Assyrian captivity of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C. Certain people from the nation of Israel stayed behind, and many intermarried with the Assyrians producing the Samaritans. Israelite Jews would not interact with Samaritans. That's what makes Jesus’ parable about the good Samaritan in Luke 10 so impactful...where there’s a man – implied to be Jewish – who'd been beaten by robbers and left for dead...and no one stops to help – including a Jewish priest – except the Samaritan man. The last person they would expect to help, actually did. So, the fact that this woman is a Samaritan, and Jesus is talking to her, makes this unusual...maybe not unusual for Jesus, but unusual for Jewish people.

**Second, she's not a man, and women were not held in high regard because of the culture of the day.** So, for Jesus to be talking with this woman is highly unusual. That's the reason why a bit later, in verse 27, the disciples come back and John tells us that they're surprised to see him talking with a woman, *and* it's pointed out that they don't ask any questions of why he's talking with her. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit convicted the disciples to use their brains and shut their traps...It's one of the greatest miracles of the New Testament – especially for Peter – and no one talks about it! 😊 We should call this “The miracle of the silent disciples.” Questioning why Jesus was talking with her, in public especially, would have been their natural response.

And then in the next few verses after where we ended, the conversation continues. Let me summarize. The conversation continues in a spiritual direction, including about worship and then about the long-expected Messiah. And Jesus tells her that he is the Messiah. Then she goes into town and tells all her friends to come and meet Jesus, telling them that Jesus knew everything about her...and it's the biggest evangelism event in the Gospels by someone other than Jesus, and many put their faith in him. So right here, we see that Jesus invites anyone to follow him. He will interact with anyone. Cultural barriers don't prevent Jesus from extending his time and his love to someone. Jesus was not afraid to interact with people of questionable reputation, and we see this throughout the gospels.

**What we see here is that perfectionism is not required to meet and begin following Jesus.** Oftentimes in the church we need to remind ourselves of that. No disrespect to the Apostle's Creed that talks about the communion of saints...but the church is more like the communion of sinners saved by grace. The church is the place where people should be welcome to find out about who Jesus is, and begin and develop their relationship with him.

But tragically, there is this misconception among not-yet-Christians that you have to be perfect even to set foot in the door of the church – and the misconception is usually because of people who already follow Jesus. So, you hear stories like the one I shared with you a moment ago of the

prostitute, whose response to an invitation to church was, “Why would I go to church? They'd only make me feel worse.” I feel ashamed that that woman didn't feel like she could come to church just as she is. Her life was not too unlike this woman at the well. **And the reality is that we all were, or have been, not that different than her. Our sin might have looked different (or maybe not)...but it's all sin.**

In 1960, Israeli undercover agents orchestrated the daring kidnapping of one of the worst of the Holocaust's masterminds, Adolf Eichmann. After capturing him in his South American hideout, they transported him to Israel to stand trial. There, prosecutors called a string of former concentration camp prisoners as witnesses. One was a small man named Yehiel Dinur, who had miraculously escaped death in Auschwitz.

On his day to testify, Dinur entered the courtroom and stared at Eichmann in the bulletproof glass booth – the man who had murdered Dinur's friends, personally executed a number of Jews, and presided over the slaughter of millions more. As the eyes of the two men met, the courtroom fell silent, filled with the tension of the confrontation.

And in that moment, Yehiel Dinur began to shout and sob, collapsing to the floor. We might think he was overcome by hatred. Or by the horrifying memories. Or by the evil incarnate in Eichmann's face.

Actually, as he later explained in a 60 Minutes interview, it was because Eichmann was not the demonic personification of evil that Dinur had expected. Rather, he was an **ordinary man (Photo)**, just like anyone else. (Looks a bit like a younger Sean McDonough, to me.) And in that one instant, Dinur came to a stunning realization that sin and evil are the human condition. “I was afraid about myself,” Dinur said. “I saw that I am capable to do this ... exactly like he.”



Dinur's remarkable story caused Mike Wallace to turn to the camera and ask

the audience the most painful of all questions: “How was it possible for a man to act as Eichmann acted? Was he a monster? A madman? Or was he perhaps something even more terrifying? Was he normal?” Yehiel Dinur’s shocking conclusion? “Eichmann is in all of us.”<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes we forget that there's a little bit of Eichmann in all of us. There's a little of the prostitute in all of us. **There's a little bit of the woman at the well in all of us.** There's a little of our neighbors, and our co-workers, and our classmates in all of us. Every person who has ever claimed the name of Jesus started out as an unrepentant sinner. So, we're not so different from those who don't know Jesus. But, we shouldn't expect Christian behavior from someone who isn't yet a Christian. We shouldn't expect Christian attitudes and understanding of sin and grace from someone who isn't yet a Christian. The problem is that oftentimes we *do* have those expectations, and so the non-Christian response expresses a sense of being judged by Christians: “Why would I go to church? They'll only make me feel worse.”

But that shouldn't be the way it is. As I said earlier in summarizing the rest of what happens in today's passage: this woman at the well is welcomed by Jesus, and she immediately goes and gets all the people from her village and brings them to him, and many put their faith in him. It's amazing! **She's the first person recorded in John to go out and evangelize...and she's a woman...and she's a Samaritan...and she's currently in a relationship with a guy who's not her husband (and don't try to say that “they're just friends”).** When you really start to get into this, it's the last part about her story that is probably the hardest for us to swallow – and the longer you've been a Jesus-follower, the harder it may be to get your mind around this: That Jesus let her minister to others even while she was imperfect. The unfortunate misconception that many people have is that you have to have everything together in your life before God can work through you.

Now, Scripture – including words of Jesus' himself – make it clear that continuing in unrepentant sin is unacceptable in the eyes of the Lord; so we're not condoning sin. There are countless Scripture verses and passages that remind us that God wants us to seek holy living today – whether that's sexual and marital purity as we see discussed in this passage, or whether it's

about lying, cheating, stealing, or rooting for the Yankees. In fact, I would bet my bottom dollar that if the Scriptures told the rest of this woman's story, we would read that she repented of the sexual sin in her life and let the grace of God fully transform her into a life that was dedicated to Jesus Christ. So, Jesus invites us as we are to follow him, and then by his grace and the power of the Holy Spirit to be changed and transformed into the holy beings we're created to be.

In the meantime, however: **We learn from this passage that you don't need to be perfect to come to Jesus, or even for him to work through you.**

Jesus listens. He cares. He will lovingly confront the sin, but it's less about judging, and more about helping us consider the reality of our sin. But before we even realize the sin in our lives, and before we've then confessed it and professed faith...before being baptized, and joining a church...long before any of that: Jesus can work through you to lead others to him. Some of us here this morning just might need to hear that, and realize that we're welcome here, and that God can work through us.

And then for those of us who are Christians, who are the body of Christ – or as I once heard Tony Campolo put it: We are “Jesus with skin on” – **How are we Christians going to help bust the myth that a person has to be perfect before they can come to Jesus?** How are we going to help others be attracted to Jesus rather than repelled by his followers? We're called to be Christ-like in how we treat others. So, what does that look like based on this passage and so many others where Jesus interacts with people who didn't fit the mold of their religious system of the day?

Jesus gives us the model here: Be where people are. Engage with them. Get on their level. Help them however you can – meet a felt need. Don't judge, but don't shy away from sharing who you are and what your convictions are, either. Jesus does all of that here.



Let me close with an example from a book called, **“Evangelism Without Additives (What if Sharing Your Faith Meant Just Being Yourself?)”** that I recently read as a part of my church transformation pastor cohort I'm a part of:

“Conversations are fragile things because people are constantly ‘sniffing’ to see who is safe and who isn’t. ...we use small talk to decide which relational trails we should take. Conversations are emotional on-ramps we provide one another to signal our potential interest in moving closer.

“When a friend at work tells you about his weekend and mentions that he and his girlfriend spent Saturday night together getting drunk at a cabin on the lake, it could easily trigger your sin-o-meter. You might feel compelled to mention that since you’re a Christian, you ‘aren’t into that sort of thing.’ If you’re a really on-fire Christian, you might even add that ‘God doesn’t like drunkenness and premarital sex.’ While both statements are true, neither one signals to your colleague that you care about him as a friend. Instead, those statements signal, ‘I don’t want to talk to you until you change and become like me.’

**“Jesus gave people an experience of love and reality, not a speech about it” (Jim Henderson, *Evangelism Without Additives*).** When people experience our attention, love, and genuine interest in them, they begin to feel differently. And some will want to know what it all means...Let the [non-Christians] come among you. Include them in the life of your Christian community—not just at a church service but also to serve with you...Let them watch you as you live life with other Christians.”<sup>3</sup> I love that: give them an experience of love and reality, not a speech about it. Invite them – not just to church – but invite them to serve with you. Engage life with them. Just be yourself and let Jesus shine through.

So, let’s love the people around us, even when their lifestyles don’t line up with our Biblical beliefs. We can listen, express genuine interest, and then invite them into our lives so they would see and experience the love of God in Christ. It’s what Jesus did here with this woman, and through her, his love changed a whole city. He can do the same through us and change ours as well. Let’s pray...Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Yancey, Philip. *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Michael G. Moriarty, *The Perfect 10: The Blessings of Following God’s Commandments in a Post Modern World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Pub. House, 1999), 219-220. See also this brief video from CBS News from a number of years later that summarizes things well: <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/the-capture-and-trial-of-adolf-eichmann/>

<sup>3</sup> Jim Henderson, *Evangelism Without Additives*, p. 58-59.