

Session 9 - Jesus, the Samaritan Woman, and Breaking Cultural Barriers (John 4: 1-42)

“Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him [Jesus] talking with a woman.”
John 4:27

- I. Women in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds.
 - A. Aristotle, as did most Greek philosophers, believed that the male was superior physically and mentally to the female and therefore was destined to rule over her. (The Stoics held a somewhat higher view of women.)
 - B. Except among the highest social classes, women were educated in the home.
 - C. Greek women married early (e.g. 14 years compared to 35 years for men). In Greek law, a woman was under authority to a male throughout her life. Divorce laws were much more liberal for men than women. Under the Romans, rules were more liberal (requiring consent for marriage by both parties). Divorce rates were high in Roman times.
 - D. The most important role of women among the Greeks and Romans was childbearing.
 - E. Women who worked typically worked in the home (there were a few midwives and merchants). Occasionally a woman accumulated considerable wealth (such as Lydia).
 - F. Generally, women did not address public assemblies.
 - G. Women enjoyed the greatest degree of freedom in public religion, serving as priestesses/prophetesses (e.g. Delphi). Occasionally, women participated independently in religious ceremonies (such as the celebration of Bacchus, the god of wine).
 - H. In general, the role of Jewish women during the time of Christ was more restricted than for the Gentiles. There is some evidence, however, of exceptions (an inscription suggests that Rufinia was the head of a synagogue during the second century after the birth of Christ).
 - I. Given this background, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is remarkable both in the character of the woman and the interaction between the woman and Jesus.
- II. Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well.
 - A. Women in the gospel of John play an important role (Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, the woman at the well). This narrative is one of many which emphasize the central role of women in the ministry of Jesus.
 - B. Seeking water at Jacob's well – a view of the woman who confronts Jesus and His response to her.
 - 1. We will concentrate on the woman and the response of Jesus to the woman rather than the message of Jesus in this study. We must

remember, however, that John provides this narrative to us primarily so that we may know Jesus (the self revelation of Jesus to us of His nature and destiny), not the Samaritan woman.

2. Some have suggested that this woman was unusual in that she comes alone to the well and comes at midday (the usual time would have been evening when many women gathered at the well). (4:6, 7) Most, however, believe drawing water would have been a normal activity for a woman who perhaps was helping workers in the nearby fields. She must have been of a lower social status or she would not be engaged in this activity. It is possible her poor reputation in the area would have lead her to come alone to the well.
3. The address of Christ to the woman (do me a favor) was unusual. (4:7) She recognized Him as a Jew (probably by His speech). Jews did not speak to Samaritans in public. Male Jews usually did not speak to females in public. (There is a rabbinical saying, “A man should hold no conversation with a woman in the street, not even with his own wife, still less with any other woman, lest men gossip”.) Jesus must have recognized something special in this woman.
4. The woman confronts Jesus with His unusual behavior. (4:9) She was bold and probably not “ladylike”. Yet Jesus is not offended with her (as He might have been with the Pharisees).
5. Jesus immediately begins a discussion of “living water”. (4:10) The woman’s native intelligence is apparent. Her response (4:11, 12) is very much like the response of Nicodemus (a ruler and intellectual) in John 3:4, that is, a concrete question with abstract overtones. She appreciated that Jesus was speaking of something more than physical water but pursued the discussion with a concrete question.
6. Jesus does not hesitate to confront her with her sins. He does not hesitate to inform her that He sees through her, that he can look back into her life and into her heart. (4:16)
7. As bold as this woman was initially, she was repentant when confronted with the facts regarding her relationship with men. (4:17)
8. When further confronted, the woman does not become defensive but rather could see Jesus. The insight displayed by this woman into the person of Jesus is remarkable. She did not see Him as an abstract figure (though He had spoken to her in the abstract). She perceives that a Jew might resolve the age old controversy between the Jews and the Samaritans (the Jews did not perceive that Jesus could resolve the controversy between the Jews and the Romans even though Jesus was a Jew). (4:19, 20)
9. After Jesus further reveals Himself to the woman (4:21 – 24), she expresses even greater insight. (4:25) She moves beyond the insight of Nicodemus in the preceding chapter (we do not read that Nicodemus moves beyond the confusion which initially brought him to Jesus, though later he was apparently a follower [John 19:38 – 42]). The fact that these

two encounters in chapters three and four are juxtaposed begs us to compare the responses of these two characters to Jesus.

10. Jesus probably reveals that He is the Messiah first to this woman (4:26) though He was recognized earlier (1:41). Later in the gospel of John, another woman, Mary Magdala was the first to witness the resurrection (Chapter 20). It is probably more significant, in the case of the woman at the well, that Jesus reveals His true status to a Samaritan (one who would not misinterpret his mission as a political mission) than to a woman. Nevertheless, that these women are the first to receive two of the greatest revelations regarding Jesus is most interesting.
11. The disciples return and are surprised that He is talking with the woman, but they do not rebuke him, suggesting that this encounter was not all that unusual. (4:27) Jesus was very comfortable in the company of women from all stations of life.
12. The woman is a convincing witness. (4:29, 30) Given her probable status in the area, this is remarkable (yet it is the power of the message rather than the messenger which is the more remarkable). Why should they listen to this frequently married woman who came to the well at noon rather than evening? She plants the seed by raising the unlikely question, “Could this be the Christ [Messiah]?”
13. The woman is open with the townspeople, revealing what must have been a painful history. (4:39)
14. The woman fades from the center of this narrative as the Samaritans from that town believe for themselves (4:42). Nevertheless, more space is devoted to this woman than to most persons other than the apostles in the New Testament.

III. Some Lessons from John’s Gospel Regarding the Role of Women in the Church.

- A. The Samaritan woman at the well overcomes several barriers (not just her womanhood) in her quest to know Jesus. These included cultural (she was a Samaritan), spiritual (she was not Jewish) and status (she was a known sinner). Her boldness is a stark contrast to the role into which we frequently place women, yet her boldness is depicted in this narrative as a strength, not a weakness. She tends to be more than less representative of the women depicted in John (especially Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdala and Martha).
- B. Though women typically maintained their social roles, they had a profound impact during Jesus’ ministry (as witnesses, as examples, as key players).
 1. Women were especially important as examples of the necessary openness to Jesus which is essential to a clear understanding of His revelation (a personal revelation of who He is). The more He said, the more she wanted to hear.
 2. Women were also important examples of persons who were uninhibited by their roles (or agendas) from acting upon the revelation. They were more

open. Some might suggest that this means they were more easily swayed. I believe they were ideal witnesses and therefore they were listened to despite their backgrounds and status.

3. The woman at the well was a prime example of the “good soil”, ready to hear the testimony of the Messiah (in contrast, for example, to Nicodemus).
- C. The women in the Gospel of John are excellent examples for both men and women.
- D. The women were primarily disciples, yet they exhibited qualities of leadership in their discipleship.
- E. The most important women in the early community of persons who followed Jesus were those who confessed Him and were witnesses of His saving grace to others. Despite our interest in the role of women, the message was more important than the messengers.
- F. Nevertheless, Jesus did not appoint women as one of the original twelve apostles. The significance of this distinction has been debated. Some suggest that the culture of the time would not have accepted women as apostles whereas others suggest that there were women leaders in Israel (such as Deborah and Queen Alexandra [who ruled Israel before Herod the Great]). These latter also argue that Christ did not hesitate to break cultural traditions in other areas (such as eating and healing on the Sabbath). Therefore Christ’s selection of only men as a clear statement of role distinction is debated to this day.
- G. The injunctions of Paul regarding women must be considered in light of the role of women in the gospels and the relationship of Jesus with women.

References

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