

# 5

## Removing Barriers with Amazing Grace

*Then Jesus having become wearied to the point of exhaustion by reason of his journey, was sitting thus at the spring.*

— (John 4:6b) Wuest<sup>1</sup>

### The Master at Work

**J**esus is exhausted, but He doesn't consider it a reason to avoid beginning the making disciple's process in the life of an "outsider." As we all know, the leading of the Spirit does not always come at times when we are rested. Here is an example of the convergence of exhaustion with Kingdom opportunity.



### Suspending the Boycott!

Those of you who have read *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed*<sup>2</sup> or attended one of our weekend conferences on this subject know that we prefer to avoid using the words *evangelism* and *discipleship*. To the Hebrew mind, *making disciples* was a seamless reality, a continuous process of discipling people into conversion and progressing to teach followers of Jesus Christ to obey all that He commanded.

On the other hand, the Western mind with its proclivity to analyze and dissect viewed *making disciples* as something that needed to be separated into two parts. The result created two new words – *evangelism* and *discipleship* – non-biblical words that cannot be found in Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. In so doing, the Western mind separated what was always intended to be seamless. Furthermore, when you create new words, you are free to give them your own definition. This was indeed done, and we have been living with detrimental consequences of that separation ever since. That's why PBT tries to avoid using those two words. We're making an exception here so we can contrast how Jesus engages this Samaritan woman with our typical Western "evangelism" practices.

*The hour was about the sixth. There comes a woman of Samaria to draw water. (4:6c-7a Wuest)*

### Go Where Sinners Go!

What is so obvious is easily missed. If you want to bring the “Good News” to “sinners,” you need to go where “sinners” go when “sinners” go there. Waiting in the narthex of a church for “sinners” to walk in because they are curious about the church’s stained glass windows (or to hear the church’s praise band) is an exercise in futility. However, if you want to bring the “Good News” to college students for example, you need to hang out where college students hang out. Same idea is true for young professionals and international students. It’s necessary to intentionally seek people out when and where they tend to congregate.

### Know Your Audience

I am always fascinated at how well Jesus understands/reads His targeted audience. This John 4 encounter is Exhibit A. Jesus knows how unusual it is for a woman to come alone to draw water at noontime. In a Near Eastern communal society, a woman doesn’t do things alone unless she purposely wants to be alone. Furthermore, she wouldn’t draw water during the hotter times of the day. It also would be obvious that this woman is not accompanied by any children (barren?). Nor is she accompanied by her husband for protection. All of these are clues that this woman is trying to avoid interaction with others. Jesus also knows this Samaritan woman has had five husbands and she is not married to the man she is currently living with. His knowledge of this will become evident to her in verse 18.

### How Could This Be?

I have yet to read a commentary that adequately addresses this five-husband issue. A few make passing comments about possible deaths and/or divorces. I suspect it is because this outcome is a

real puzzler. How could such a thing possibly happen in this culture? The odds of five husbands all dying are far too remote. Same reasoning holds true for five divorces.

We do not know the “theology of divorce” for this first-century Samaritan religious culture. However, since the Samaritans embraced the same first five books of the Bible as observant Jews do, we can reasonably assume it parallels Jewish interpretation. Thus any man who divorces his wife must give her a writ of divorce which states the reason(s) for his divorcing of her. Any woman who has received a writ of divorce must show it to the future husband prospect so there are no surprises.

As previously alluded to, there is reason to conclude that this woman is barren. Infertility is a huge issue in Near Eastern culture and a valid reason for a man to divorce his wife. A woman’s role is to procreate. Failure to do so is a profound issue of shame. From an observant Jewish perspective in the First Century, infertility was obvious evidence that God doesn’t like you. I developed in *Zechariah and Elizabeth*<sup>3</sup> why that is a heavy thought to live with day after day, year after year.

This raises the question of why would any man want to marry her if she is known to be barren? Was it possible that the other four husbands all died? Again, that seems highly improbable. Even allowing for two deaths, two other men, for whatever reason, agreed to marry her after her first divorce. I doubt this is because she is the first-century version of a “trophy wife” since the evidence would suggest she is anything but that. Could she have somehow hidden her barrenness from these two other husbands? This too is highly improbable in Near Eastern villages where there were no secrets.

While we cannot connect all the dots on her five prior husbands, we do know the sixth man in her life is willing to live with her (and use her) but not marry her. In fact he is not even willing to accompany her to this well to protect her for safety reasons. By his actions and inactions, this sixth man is basically declaring for all to see that this woman is not worth marrying, not worth protecting; and in fact, not worth much of anything at all except to be used.

Any way you decide to size up the situation, this woman may well have been at the top of the shame list in the first-century Guinness/Samaritan Book of Records. She may have accumulated so many layers of rejection, humiliation and guilt that she is now openly living in a state of beyond shame, which may explain why she is willing to live with a man who is not her husband. For the Samaritan world, I strongly suspect this is a particularly messy life history – one beyond the pale. And if you want to peek ahead, Jesus can even use all the messiness of her life to draw others to Himself (John 4:29-30). Amazing!

### Jesus Knows!

None of this Samaritan woman's life is hidden from Jesus as He sizes up how best to initiate a relationship with her. He knows all about her unfulfilled longings, struggles, regrets and her many unanswered questions. He also knows her dashed dreams and all the internal wounds of rejection, humiliation and abandonment that are still hemorrhaging. He knows the pain of her past and all the snide remarks – spoken and unspoken – that have been directed at her. He also knows how, with each month's failed attempt at conception, her sense of inadequacy, unworthiness and powerlessness deepened. He knows the tears she has shed in the middle of the

night from being a lonely resident in her world of perpetual shame. He understands the bouts of soul-searching and self-doubt she has endured and her prolonged periods of discouragement that sometimes slipped into despair. He knows how difficult it can be for a soul to ache for something that seems so right, so good, yet never arrives. He knows what it is like for her when the last rays of hope fade away into the dark night of the soul.

### Barrier Removal

Establishing relationships with people is contingent upon removing whatever barriers (actual or perceived) that exist and thwart dialogue. When we take a 5,000 foot elevated perspective on the Gospels, we see Jesus at work removing the religious and cultural barriers that prevent people from coming to Him. In this particular encounter, Jesus has to remove a mountain of prejudice between Jews and Samaritans as well as penetrate layers of low self-worth in this woman. He is in the barrier removal business as we should be. Sometimes we have to be really (Spirit led) creative when it comes to interpersonal barrier removal, so let's closely watch the Master Communicator as He interacts.

### Appropriate Initiative

Knowing all of this woman's past as well as what it has done and is still doing to her, Jesus knows how not to initiate a dialogue with her. He knows the last thing she needs right now is to be called a "sinner." So the "repentance" theme often used by his cousin John the Baptizer is not an option as an "opener" here. Jesus knows she is a dry sponge desperately in need of the waters of Grace to saturate her arid soul. So He devises an intentionally gracious approach that will 1) surprise and disarm her, 2) elevate her (lift her up) and give her some

dignity, 3) be personal and private, 4) shatter cultural taboos and barriers, 5) encourage her to respond, and 6) prepare the way for discussing truth later. Jesus' approach is always personal, not a "one size fits all." He is not going to engage her at all like He did Nicodemus.

### I Can't Do That?

One of the hallmark attributes of a disciple is that he or she emulates his or her rabbi. As we start to watch the Master Communicator quickly size up this situation, you might be inclined to react *I can't do that! I don't have the perfect knowledge of people that Jesus has. I can't anticipate the hurts, pains, guilt and shame of another.* And you're absolutely correct. That's why it's often not helpful to have a "canned" approach to evangelism. Rather, you may need to invest a year or two of "Grace Time" with another person, getting to know him or her so that the Holy Spirit can prompt you at just the right time(s) to make the appropriate remark, ask the relevant question, or to probe a crucial area in another's life. Most of the time, redemptive outcomes are rooted in relationships. In our microwave approach to just about everything today, we want to save someone on their Spring Break beach week in two minutes on power 10. It seems we don't have any more time than that to establish genuine connectedness.

Meanwhile, back to Jesus at the well as He speaks His opening words to this Samaritan woman.

*Jesus says to her, Give me a drink, for His disciples had gone off into the city in order that they might buy food in the market place. (4:7b-8 Wuest)*

### Taking the Initiative

If someone is coming to a well at mid-day, a perfectly natural subject to bring up is water.

That is not a contrived topic. It fits the context of the situation. (If you're wondering what a disingenuous, contrived opening interaction might look like, consider this: *"Shalom. It's a sunny day isn't it? And speaking of the sun, do you know the Son of God?"*)

There is more to Jesus' opening request than meets the Western eye. In the Near East during the First Century, men do not have private interactions with women. The culture forbids it. In addition, there is a tradition in the Middle East that any request for water must be responded to. Water is scarce and having access to water is often the difference between life and death. Thus, when Jesus asks give me a drink, He is making a request that He knows mandates a response. Furthermore, Jesus is breaking a cultural taboo by asking for help from a woman. Therefore in his surprisingly short opening request, Jesus breaks through centuries of racial animosity barriers as well as a barrier that subordinates women. As disciples of Jesus, we need to lean on the Holy Spirit, asking Him to give us the necessary wisdom for simple, yet creative openers that will likewise remove barriers and lead to redemptive dialogue with others.

Note also that Jesus sends his disciples off into the city (presumably **Shechem**) to buy bread. So much for the traditional notion that Jews won't have any interactions with Samaritans, e.g., won't eat their food. It strikes me that Jesus knows that if the disciples were to hang around the well watching this interaction unfold, they would be an impediment to this redemptive interaction – yes, that's what unseasoned disciples can sometimes be. Their looks of shock and amazement may well have served as a wet blanket on the willingness of this woman to dialogue with and then divulge her reality to Jesus.

## How Can This Be?

*The Samaritan woman then says to Him, How is it that you being a Jew, are asking a drink from me, being a woman of Samaria, for Jews do not associate (do not use things) with Samaritans. (4:9 Wuest)*

This particular sentence has been weakly handled in many Bible translations. Leon Morris points out that the verb being used is an unusual one and is only found here in the Greek New Testament. It is a compound verb that literally means use with.<sup>24</sup> It does not mean *associate with*. Therefore the question for this passage is: what does a Jew not use with Samaritans? And the answer in this specific contextual setting is clear: the same drinking cup/vessel. Remember, this is a Jewish world preoccupied with issues of ritual impurity. The Samaritan woman knows that no Jew will share a drinking vessel with her; for by doing so, a Jew would become ritually defiled. But what she doesn't know (yet) is that this is no ordinary Jew! This is *Yeshua*, God's Rescuer, and He is not going to let religious custom interfere with establishing a redemptive relationship.

Jesus is redefining and making obsolete traditional understandings of issues of ritual purity. Sharing a drinking vessel with a Samaritan woman (as well as other issues of ritual impurity) can no longer be viewed as a barrier to redemptive relationships. In fact if you go up again to 5,000 feet and look down on the Gospels, Jesus is doing something to make Himself ritually unclean in just about every chapter. Yet we find no record of Him ever going to a ritual purification bath! Welcome to the paradigm-changing and paradigm-expanding world of Jesus.

## Amazing Initiating Grace!

Isn't it amazing what Jesus did with four simple words – *give me a drink* – four Grace-infused words packed with barrier removal efficacy! He took the initiative and both surprised and disarmed this woman. He lowered Himself by asking her to serve Him, thereby affording her some dignity which helped put her at ease. He ignored long-standing taboos regarding privately interacting with women as well as (cup) contact ritual purity. He also put her in a position where she had to respond to Him. Now a dialogue can start to unfold. Mission accomplished. Her *fullness of time* has come.

## What Jesus Doesn't Do

Before leaving this chapter, let's reflect upon what Jesus did not do when initiating a dialogue with this woman. He didn't

- Arrive with a Deuteronomy scroll in hand so He could (figuratively speaking) repeatedly beat her over the head with it using Scripture verses regarding sin like an assault weapon.
- Start by pressing a Scriptural tract into her hand to prove she is a "sinner" going to Hell unless she first repents. Then having delivered that grenade, retreat to a posture of self-satisfied smugness feeling *There, I did my job. I confronted her with the Truth*. And then self-proclaim himself to be the *well done thou good and faithful servant*.
- Lay out in detail at the beginning everything He knew about her, e.g., her five husbands.
- Start out by scolding her for her "bad choices," e.g. living with a man who is not her husband.

- Open up with a “canned” witness or a long monologue/soliloquy, e.g., reciting the Sermon on the Mount.
- Take an elitist approach, nor adopt a superior attitude towards her as if he was doing her a favor.

In summary, Jesus led with profound, barrier-removing Grace, not with Truth. And that made all the difference. Jesus knows all about Truth. That can be dealt with later. He also knows that in order to rightly handle the Truth, it must be preceded with Grace so the Truth can be redemptively heard – something we can all emulate in the relationships in our lives.

### Reflections to Journal and Share

- Do you intentionally decide to go to places where non-believers congregate to let the light of Christ shine through you?
- Do you sense the heart of God beating intensely for this precious “outcast”? Does your heart beat in harmonic ways with His?
- Do you take time to prepare your heart for those times when you will knowingly be engaging non-believers?

- Do you consciously think in terms of “barrier removal” when it comes to establishing redemptive relationships?
- Agree or disagree: If you assumed every person you met was lonely, discouraged, internally feeling the weight of guilt and shame, is still dealing with unresolved past issues of abandonment, rejection and humiliation, you would be right 90% of the time. Since we live in a fallen world, maybe we do automatically know a lot about every person we meet as soon as we meet them!

## Notes and Sources

1 Kenneth S. Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961).

2 Doug Greenwold, *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed* (Columbia, MD: Bible-in-Context Ministries, 2012).

3 Doug Greenwold. *Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God* (Columbia, MD: Bible-in-Context Ministries, 2005).

4 Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John*, Volume 1: *The Word Became Flesh, John 1-5* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1986) 125.



