

Why Jesus is the only path to true spirituality

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- [0 : 00] Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptising more disciples than John, although Jesus himself did not baptise but only his disciples, he left Judea and departed again for Galilee.
- And he had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.
- Jacob's well was there, so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. A woman from Samaria came to draw water.
- Jesus said to her, Give me a drink. For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?
- For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, Give me a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.
- [1 : 21] The woman said to him, Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?
- Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.
- Jesus said to her, Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.
- The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water, welling up to eternal life. The woman said to him, Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.
- Jesus said to her, Go, call your husband and come here. The woman answered him, I have no husband.
- [2 : 28] Jesus said to her, You are right in saying, I have no husband. For you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband.
- What you have said is true. The woman said to him, Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.
- Jesus said to her, Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.
- You worship what you do not know. We worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.
- God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. The woman said to him, I know that Messiah is coming, he who is called Christ.
- [3 : 48] When he comes, he will tell us all things. Jesus said to her, I who speak to you am he. Just then his disciples came back.

They marvelled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, what do you seek? Or, why are you talking with her? So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did.

Can this be the Christ? They went out of the town and were coming to him. As mentioned by Andy, we're going to be trying to deal with this question of why Jesus is the route to only true spirituality.

It's always slightly difficult. I've realised that when you choose a topic before you realise what you're going to say, that that isn't necessarily the wisest decision to make. So I actually had the great privilege of choosing this topic, and then realising that actually it's incredibly difficult to answer.

I think it's incredibly difficult to answer because no matter what we think of when we talk about the word spirituality, we inevitably are going to have quite a personal experience with that question.

[5 : 07] So whatever it might be for you isn't necessarily going to be what it is for somebody else. But what is enormously striking is that while since about 1980 church attendance has fallen drastically, the use of the word spiritual and spirituality in our public discourse has increased sevenfold since 1980.

Now that's quite striking, isn't it? You might have thought that as people got less religious, they would become less spiritual. But it's actually been the reverse. As people have got less religious, for some reason they have become more spiritual.

Now you'll notice I still haven't defined what spirituality is, and I'm not entirely convinced I'm able to, other than to say something like a belief in a force outside myself, whether it be divine, spiritual, God, some kind of power.

And of course if we pause to think about what our friends might be interested in, who wouldn't call themselves religious but would call themselves spiritual, yoga, every single pose has a spiritual context.

New age practices like tarot card readings and crystals, even in a local church fair in Dulwich. I was surprised to see in the church hall they were selling crystals.

[6 : 25] It's becoming more and more common wherever we go. But I think the more significant question before we try and think about what is spirituality is to ask the question why.

Why this increase in spirituality over the last 30 years? Why is it that church attendance has fallen, yet so many people are using this phrase and using these kind of practices?

Why? Well, I put one of my friends, she works at the coffee shop Redemption that I'm often in, and I see many of you throughout the week in there. I asked her, she uses this phrase, she has a tattoo of an angel on her arm, and I asked her, why do you call yourself spiritual and not religious?

And she was wonderfully honest, and gave what I think was a very genuine answer, and she says, because I'm afraid of dying. And I thought that was very perceptive, that she'd realised that the atheistic world view, that we are just matter in motion, doesn't answer the question of what happens to me when I die.

Why am I here? Why does my life have meaning? And in her words, she described her spirituality as an existential comfort blanket. She's an English literature major, which essentially means that her spirituality is comforting her in the face of the fact that she will one day die.

[7 : 49] And ultimately, she summarised it as the fact that she is afraid. So why is she spiritual? Well, very perceptively, because she's afraid. And she realises that she needs something to help her with that fear.

And if I might suggest, therefore, that all spiritual belief really, arguably, could flow from that same source, we recognise that our world of career, and money, and success doesn't answer the questions that we actually want the answer to.

It doesn't even come close, in fact. And so we bring in our own forms of spirituality, whatever they might be, particularly at points of crisis. Why? Because we're afraid. We turn to spirituality because we want freedom from fear.

And so, what we see this morning in this beautiful passage, probably one of my favourite passages, I know it's one of my staff, my colleagues' members' favourite passages in the whole of the New Testament, is we see, in a nutshell, what happens when fear meets Jesus.

What happens when fear meets Jesus. And we only have one point today, and we're just going to spend most of our time there, and that is that we're going to see that what happens when fear meets Jesus is that fear turns to freedom.

[9 : 09] Fear turns to freedom. Now, we might not have initially noticed that this is actually a very fearful chapter in many ways. We may not have seen that, and so allow me to take us through this beautiful and wonderful passage.

starting at verse 4, and he, Jesus, had to pass through Samaria. So, Jesus came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there.

So, Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. Jesus is in a foreign land, we'll come to the significance of that in a second, and he's tired.

Sixth hour means that it's right slap bang in the middle of the day. For any of you that have ever been on holiday in Dubai or any other place with 100% humidity, you'll know exactly what that feels like. Horrendous.

The one place you don't want to be is out somewhere in the middle of the desert with no shade. And Jesus is wearied, and he sits down at the edge of a well. And in an incredibly pithy, yet poignant description, John tells us pretty much nearly everything we need to know about this woman in a couple of words in verse 7.

[10 : 18] A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Now, you would never draw water in the middle of the day in a desert.

We probably aren't used to particularly carrying water unless it's our chilli bottles or whatever they're called, but water is heavy. And you would have to walk from the town, and you'd have to walk all the way up to where the well is, and you'd have to dip the bucket down into the water, haul it all the way back up, and then take it back into town.

It was back-breaking work. So women in particular, it was their job to gather the water. So they would go either very early in the morning when it was most cool or at dusk when it was cool again.

And you would always go in groups, keep each other company, help one another as you're lifting the water. And so this is very insightful that this woman has come alone at the hottest part of the day because she wants to avoid everybody else.

She's ashamed of something. What she's ashamed of, what she's afraid of, what we'll come to see. But it is significant that as we start this interaction, the first thing that we're introduced to is a fearful woman.

[11 : 27] A fearful woman. And Jesus, in one fell swoop, he then breaks three social taboos in four words. It's very impressive. Three social taboos in four words by turning to her and saying, give me a drink.

And three social taboos. The first is racial. We mentioned that Jesus is in Samaria. I suppose it would be like a Palestinian talking to a Jewish person or Sunni and Shia in Iran.

Samaritans hated Jews. And Jews hated Samaritans. And it was a hatred that went back hundreds and hundreds of years. Samaritans were originally Jews.

They then separated and married with foreigners and worshipped their gods. And so Jews saw them as half-blood traitors. It's about as visceral a description as you could possibly get.

They hated one another. They would never speak to one another. And the woman knows it. Do you see in the brackets in verse 9? For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. And Jesus, in one fell swoop, breaks the racial taboo and speaks to her.

[12 : 30] The second is gender. A Jewish man would never speak with a woman in private, with no one else around. Certainly not a foreign woman.

You see that in verse 27. Just then his disciples came back. They marvelled that he was talking with a woman. And the third is a religious taboo that Jesus breaks in one fell swoop.

We saw in verse 2, didn't we, of our reading, verse 1, sorry, that Jesus had followers, more disciples than John. He was a religious leader. And again, in one fell swoop, he discards all propriety and addresses this woman, this fearful, ashamed, alone woman.

Give me a drink. And the Samaritan woman knows that Jesus has just broken these taboos and she basically, in a very racist and annoyed response, says, no.

Did we notice that? How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from a Samaritan woman myself? Do you see, it is a racist, motivated, no way.

[13 : 39] Why are you speaking to me, Jew? I'm not going to give you water, you fool. Now at this point, we're kind of impressed that Jesus has decided to break these three social taboos and we might be thinking, well, what's Jesus going to do next?

Surely the obvious thing to do would be to turn around, ignore this rude woman, try and find your disciples who've gone to Tesco and get them to help you drag up some water. But instead, Jesus doubles down in verse 10.

Jesus answered her, if you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, give me a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water. In other words, what Jesus is saying is, woman, if you knew who was speaking to you, if you knew that God himself was addressing you and asking you for water, you would not have given me a racial slur and you instead would have asked me for eternal life and I would have given it to you is the implication.

Our woman is still not understanding. I hear, I've lived in cities my whole life so I don't really understand this dichotomy but I hear that people in the country don't like people in the city. I hear that that's apparently a well-known thing.

They think we're foolish, they think, oh my goodness, if we don't have our midnight kebab shops, how are we ever going to cope? That is true. And you can kind of tell that she's giving this townie that kind of, you idiot kind of look.

[15 : 02] Do you see verse 11? Sir, you have nothing to draw water with and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? She's kind of thinking, I have the bucket, you don't. How are you going to give me water?

In the battle of who gets water, the one with the bucket wins. That's what she's thinking at this stage. But she doesn't understand that Jesus is talking metaphorically yet.

And Jesus keeps going. Verse 13, Jesus said to her, Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.

The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. The woman said to him, Sir, give me this water so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.

We can sense the hope starting to creep into the woman's words, can't we? Really? Are you saying, Jesus, that you can offer me something which means that I never have to hide in the middle of the day to get my water again?

[16 : 11] Is that what you're saying? And you can imagine how liberated she might be feeling at this moment thinking that perhaps this might be someone who might actually help her. She might actually be able to escape her shame.

But then Jesus drops an absolute social clangor and bombshell. Often when I've heard this passage preached, people use this as an example of how to engage with the culture, find their deepest, darkest secrets and reveal them.

Can I just say, don't. This is not a kind of 101 on how to talk to people about our religion. Jesus finds the thing that she is most ashamed of, most embarrassed of, most guilty of and presents her with it.

Do we see in verse 16? Go call your husband and come here. The woman answered him, I have no husband. Jesus said to her, you are right in saying, I have no husband.

For you have had five husbands and the one you now have is not your husband. what you have said is true. In other words, Jesus is saying, instead of explaining to our woman that no, no, you don't understand, this is a metaphor, just believe in me and then you can have eternal water.

[17 : 30] Jesus puts his finger on what is a much greater problem. He puts his finger on the fact that this woman has a guilt problem. He puts his finger right on what she is most ashamed of and he brings it straight into the light.

And our woman knows she has a guilt problem. She knows. It doesn't take a genius to work out that if she is going every single day to get water in the back-breaking heat and desperate to avoid anybody else and that she is deeply ashamed.

She knows she's guilty. And you can imagine it wouldn't just be when she gathers water, you can imagine her going to the shop right when it opens so as to avoid anybody else or right when it closes so that she doesn't have to run into her neighbours.

You can imagine that she's very well acquainted with what her shoes look like as she's walking down the street looking down, terrified of hearing what people might be saying of her, terrified of catching someone's eye and seeing the condescending and judgmental look.

And it must have been really lovely for five minutes for her to be able to speak to someone who she thought doesn't know her background. And Jesus, in one fell swoop, reveals her guilt, reveals her shame.

[18 : 52] And the reason that John has put this story here is because John wants to use this woman as a microcosm. What happens when fear, when guilty, fearful people meet Jesus?

Certainly, we want the answer to that question. because John has put this question here not just for the woman, but because every single one of us, including myself, especially myself, are guilty as well.

It is not just the woman, in other words, who has a guilt problem. We have a guilt problem. I have a guilt problem. So this is a beautiful foreshadowing of the question that all of us desperately want the answer to.

What happens when a guilty person, a racist person, meets the Lord Jesus Christ? What does Jesus do with them? What does he say to her?

Does he do what every single other person has done? Do not speak to me. Do not look at me. I want nothing to do with you. Is that what Jesus does with guilty people? Or does Jesus do something entirely different?

[19 : 59] I want us to imagine if we are not convinced that this is important for us, I want us to imagine our thought life and our life in general as a house or a flat depending. And I want you to imagine that Jesus comes and knocks on the thought life house door and you open it and Jesus says I've come to have a look round.

And Jesus looks in every single room of our house to see our thought life and he goes into the living room and he sees all of the ways that we interact with our loved ones and he sees all the thoughts that we have about them at our worst moments.

The thoughts that we have about our spouse and our partner, the thoughts that we have about our children, our colleagues. He then goes into our office and he sees how we spend our time.

He sees the internet history that we try to delete and paper over. He sees the hours spent on Netflix when we should have been working. And then he goes into our ensuite bathroom and looks in our mirror and he sees the lies that we tell ourselves about beauty and vanity and he sees the insecurities that we have.

And what would Jesus see if he looked into every dark corner of our thought life? And that's before we even talk about our words and our deeds. What would he see? Of course, therefore, we are desperately keen to see how Jesus treats guilty people because we are guilty people.

[21 : 25] We have a guilt problem. And the beautiful, and this is why I think this is one of the most favoured and precious stories for so many Christians, is that we see that Jesus acts in exactly the opposite way that anybody else would and that anybody else could be expected to.

Verse 22, Jesus talking to the woman says, you worship what you do not know. We worship what we know for salvation is from the Jews, but the hour is coming and is now here when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

For the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

Do we see though the outrageous freight, the beautiful freight that is brought in in that word Father? Father.

And you pause for a second and you go, hang on, you have just exposed the fact that this woman is a social outcast, that she is racist, that she has had five husbands and she's currently shackled up with the sixth.

[22 : 40] You should be running a million miles, Jesus. You should not be speaking to a Jesus, let alone saying that you, woman, you can call God Father.

You can call him Father. Father. Is that not just the most beautiful and intimate twist on what anybody else in power and authority would ever do in that situation?

We are tired, aren't we, of seeing powerful men abuse weak women. And in another scenario where we see a powerful man, the Lord Jesus Christ, with disciples and followers, and we see a woman who is by absolute definition of the lowest of the low, Jesus says, not only do I know you and see your guilt, I say you can call God Father.

Now if that is not breathtaking, then I don't know what is. Because Jesus then continues to say, the woman is, she's excited at this prospect, and you can see her getting excited, and she says in verse 25, I know that the Messiah is coming, he who is called the Christ, when he comes he will tell us all things.

In other words, she's saying, yeah, maybe one day that is true, strange man who knows my past, maybe one day that is true when the Christ comes, maybe he will let me call God Father, when the Christ comes.

[23 : 58] And verse 26, the hammer falls, Jesus said to her, I who speak to you, am he. In other words, Jesus is saying, this isn't some kind of abstract offer, woman from Samaria, that you can call God Father, I am saying that because I am the Christ, I see you, I love you, I accept you, you can call God Father, you, a Samaritan outcast.

And I want us to notice as we begin to wrap up and think about implications, how the woman changes as she goes and brings her fear to Jesus. This is what I want us to really see, it's very precious.

She begins in verse 8 by calling Jesus Jew, racial slur. Verse 11, she's now calling him Sir.

And by the end, in verse 29, she says, come, see a man who told me all that I ever did, can this be the Christ? But notice with me the beautiful detail in verse 28, the woman left her jar and went away into the town and said to the people, the very same people that she had been hiding from, the very same reason that she had come to get water, she then after meeting Jesus drops the bucket and runs to the people that she was previously afraid of.

Can you imagine? She has gone from fear to preacher. She has gone from ashamed to proclaiming, is this the Christ? What happens when fear meets Jesus?

[25 : 40] Freedom. Beautiful, liberating, freedom. freedom. Because Jesus is the Christ and he can bring us to the Father. Two implications for us as we close.

The first is to say, and this is probably the bit that will be most offensive to our modern day sensibilities, is to say that Jesus is the only way to have this kind of freedom.

If we return to my friend Flo, she's afraid of death and so she hangs on to some kind of loose form of spirituality. But can I say that the problem is far too small.

We have a guilt problem and we need the guilt dealt with. And it is only Jesus that if we were to read on in John's account, we would see this same Jesus who treats this woman with such love and dignity and respect, go to a piece of wood, be nailed to it for her sin.

We have a guilt problem. The solution is Christ. The only solution is Christ. No other kind of crystals, or spirituality or other gods or loose prayer or hopeful thoughts at a funeral can do away with the reality that we need Jesus.

[26 : 52] We need this man and this man only. And the final implication for us is that is this not ultimately what we long for? To be actually seen as we are, to not have to pretend, to not have to stand at work and try and put on a face, to not have to try and pretend to our wife or our husband that actually we're a good person, to not have to lie to ourselves in the mirror, to actually go to the one person who has power and authority to forgive us and know with absolute certainty that he will never say, not you, definitely not you, everybody else fine, but you, no, but instead will say, I know you, I see you, I love you, I forgive you.

is that not what we long for? Why don't I lead us in a prayer? Father, we thank you so, so much for the Lord Jesus Christ, that he is unlike any man that has ever lived, and we thank you that in him and him alone we can have true freedom from fear, freedom from our guilt.

Amen.