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Bridgeway Church
Gospel of John #14
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Sermon Summary #14

Intellectual Light, Spiritual Heat, and the True Worship of the True God John 4:1-42

Last week we spent all our time unpacking the significance of what Jesus said in John 4:23. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, he told her that God is seeking people to worship him in spirit and in truth. That's the sort of statement that will either offend you and make you angry and cause you to turn and run away from God, or it will fill you with joy and delight and excitement as you realize that in your worship of God you find your greatest heart happiness and soul satisfaction. But I don't want to preach last week's message again, so today we turn our attention to the story as a whole.

The method Jesus employed to teach this woman and us about worship is strange, by anybody's standards. He didn't make his point in one of the many synagogues of his day. He didn't sit comfortably under the amber glow of stained-glass windows and lecture a large crowd of intellectual elites about the nature of God and what it means to properly worship him. Instead, he sat down on the edge of a water well in the middle of a hot, sun-soaked day and struck up a conversation with a total stranger.

Let me briefly remind you of why this encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman was so shocking to people in the first century. It doesn't strike us as unusual or offensive. But for a Jewish man to engage a Samaritan woman in public and speak openly of her sexual sin was outrageous in that day and age. To understand why, let me again remind you of who the Samaritans were.

The Samaritans

In 722 b.c., Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Israel and deported most of its citizens. The remnant of those who stayed behind inter-married with pagan Gentiles. They were, therefore, considered "half breeds" by Jews who were determined to marry only other Jews. The Samaritan insisted that the true worship should take place in Shechem and not in Jerusalem. They built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim and acknowledged only the Pentateuch as Scripture. There developed over time an intense racial and religious animosity between Samaritans and Jews. The Jewish people of the first century looked on Samaritans as ceremonially defiled, racially impure, and religiously heretical.

Today we refer to that famous story in Luke's gospel as the parable of the "Good Samaritan." Most Jews in the first century would have considered this a contradiction in terms. As far as they were concerned, there was no such thing as a "good" Samaritan.

This hostility between Jews and Samaritans was obviously known to this woman. In verse 9 she responds to the request by Jesus for a drink of water by saying: "How is that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) The phrase "have no dealings with" is the rendering of a single word in Greek. It literally means, "to use together with." She is acknowledging that Jews and Samaritans don't drink from the same well or make use of the same bucket. They do not eat together or drink together.

In case you are wondering, the answer is Yes, this was the first-century equivalent to what was so prevalent here in the U.S. during the days of segregation, when blacks and whites made use of different water fountains and different public restrooms. What she doesn't realize is that far from being defiled by what is unclean, Jesus sanctifies and purifies what he touches.

I've shared this illustration before, but it helps greatly in understanding the division and disdain that existed between these two groups. Try to envision for a moment that you live in San Francisco, California, and you need to travel to Seattle, Washington. Any reasonable person would go due north, through Oregon, into Washington. But you so deeply despise Oregon that you don't want to set foot in the state. So you go hundreds of miles out of your way by turning

east and driving through Nevada and Idaho before then turning west and making your way into Washington, and eventually to Seattle.

This is much the same as what we find in the first century. Judea, much like California, was in the south, with Samaria, like Oregon, to its north. Galilee, like Washington, was north of Samaria. The Jews in our Lord's day hated the Samaritans so deeply that if they had to travel from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, they would first travel east, cross the river Jordan near Jericho, and then journey north before turning west into Galilee, all in order to avoid setting so much as a foot on Samaritan soil.

But Jesus and his disciples took the more direct route from Judea to Galilee. We read in vv. 3-4 that they "left Judea [in the south] and departed again for Galilee [in the north]. And he *had* to pass through Samaria." The word "had to" is less a reference to geographical necessity and more a reference to his divine mission. He knew that there was something of profound importance for him to do in Samaria. His disciples may have initially protested, but Jesus was determined. He Jesus refused to avoid Samaria. He chose not to take the long journey around Samaria in order to avoid the defilement that so many Jews believed they would incur if they set foot on Samaritan soil.

Jesus, being fully aware of this division between Jews and Samaritans, defied the social and religious taboos of his day by asking this woman for a drink of water. The fact that Jesus encountered her at high noon is significant. Women were more likely to come in groups to fetch water and normally early in the morning or later in the day in order to avoid the heat. Evidently this woman's sense of shame and reproach led her to come now, alone, so she could escape the scorn and isolation of others.

How often do we fail to seize an opportunity to talk to someone about Jesus because of prejudice? Perhaps it is a person's ethnicity or the way they dress or what we perceive to be their educational or financial shortcomings. Jesus refused to let any such thing stand in his way of telling this female Samaritan where she could find the kind of water that leads to eternal life.

No one in the first century would have objected to Jesus speaking to someone like Nicodemus (John 3). But the contrasts between Nicodemus and this woman are stunning.

Nicodemus was educated
The Samaritan woman was unschooled.
Nicodemus was a powerful and influential man in the community.
The Samaritan woman would hardly have been noticed by anyone.
Nicodemus was highly respected.
The Samaritan woman was despised.
Nicodemus was an orthodox Jewish man.
The Samaritan was an immoral, heretical woman.

Even our Lord's disciples are offended that he is seen in public talking with this woman. We read in v. 27 that "just then his disciples came back" and "marveled that he was talking with a woman" (John 4:27). I find it almost humorous that none of them had the courage either to ask the woman what she wanted or to ask Jesus what in the world he was doing violating such a long-standing social taboo. In any case, Jesus didn't care! He is no less concerned with her soul than he is with the soul of Nicodemus, and no absurd social taboo is going to keep him from reaching out to her with the good news of eternal life.

Instead of answering her question directly Jesus raises the level of conversation from physical water to spiritual water (see vv. 10-12). "You don't even have a bucket," she replies. "How do you propose to draw water from the well?" Our Lord drives home his point by telling her that the truly amazing thing isn't that he can give her water without a bucket but that the water he provides satisfies spiritually and leads to eternal life.

Her response in v. 15 indicates that she still doesn't get it. So Jesus decides that *the best way into her heart is to open a wound*. "Go, call your husband, and come here" (v. 16). When she tells Jesus she has no husband, Jesus turns up the heat: "That's right. You've had five husbands, and the man you're sleeping with now isn't your husband" (v. 18).

If you're wondering how Jesus would have known such intimate details about a woman that he had never before met, we saw the answer to this last week. See John 3:34-35. It was the Holy Spirit who revealed this sort of information to Jesus. Could this be a precursor, as it were, to what we call the spiritual gift of prophecy or the gift of word of knowledge? Possibly.

Before I move on from this, I want to say something about what is called "*power evangelism*." It is clear that as a result of our Lord's disclosure of what she thought was her secret sin, this woman's hard heart was softened and her blind eyes were opened to see who Jesus was and her need for salvation. We read in v. 28 that she immediately "left her water jar and went away into the town" to inform the people about Jesus, whom she describes as "a man who told me all that I ever did" (v. 29).

We then read in v. 39 that "many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony." Others came to faith once they had an opportunity to hear Jesus for themselves, as vv. 40-42 make clear. But my point is simply to remind you that God can use supernatural encounters like this to shatter the shell of cynicism behind which people hide their hearts. A miracle alone, or a word of knowledge alone, or a prophetic revelation by itself does not have the power to save. But these works of the Holy Spirit do have the power to capture someone's attention and to awaken in them curiosity and to educate them in the reality of the supernatural realm and eventually to open a door into their hearts whereby the gospel message can take root and lead to faith.

You may recall that the apostle Peter healed a paralyzed man named Aeneas, as recorded in Acts 9. We then read that "all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him [i.e., they saw Aeneas standing up] and they turned to the Lord" (Acts 9:35). And Paul describes a similar scenario in 1 Corinthians 14 where he says that "if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters [your meeting], he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed [much like the Samaritan woman in John 4], and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you" (1 Cor. 14:24-25). Such is the fruit of power evangelism!

Now, back to our story. The shock in her soul must have been intense. Try to imagine how you would react if told your most intimate secrets by a complete stranger. A little later, in v. 29, she runs back into the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did." This may be an indication that Jesus spoke to this woman about more than simply her sexual partners. Perhaps he spoke to her about other matters that he could not have known unless it had been revealed to him by the Spirit. Or it may be an example of her intentional exaggeration, a way of making known how central her sinful, sexual life was to her own thinking.

Jesus knows that repeated sexual sin has the tendency to harden and calcify one's heart. Your struggle may not be sexual sin, like hers, but many of us move from one job to another, or from one hobby to another, or from one church to another, or we regularly change friends, or our wardrobe, or our hairstyle, or our car, all with a view to slaking the spiritual thirst in our souls. He knows that her biggest challenge isn't her thirst for what water can do for her body but the spiritual thirst of her heart.

Someone once said that "every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is unconsciously looking for God." That doesn't mean visiting a prostitute isn't a sin! It simply means that he mistakenly thinks that the pleasures of sexual sin can do for him what only God can. That was this woman's struggle.

What's amazing is that after this initial disclosure of her sin, Jesus says nothing more about it. He didn't bring it up in the first place to condemn her but to expose her real thirst, a thirst she didn't even know she had. It was the thirst of her soul to be forgiven and loved and accepted that drove her into arms of one man after another. ***Jesus didn't bring up her string of lovers because he wanted to talk about sex. He only used her immorality as a doorway into her heart, as a way of exposing to herself the idolatry of her soul.*** As Jesus will later say in John 17:3, "And this is eternal life, [not the passing physical pleasures that come from sex and alcohol and the praise of men, but] that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

And don't think this encounter was unique. Jesus knows your past and present and your heart just as thoroughly as he knew hers. And he has water for you that will so completely satisfy your soul that you won't find it necessary to run off into whatever sin you mistakenly believe will cure the ache inside.

Let me slow down for a minute and say something about the importance of water in this story. We can't fully appreciate the impact of what Jesus said because we don't suffer from a lack of water. We generally take it for granted. No one thinks twice about the bottle of water that I have here within reach. But in the first century there were no public water fountains, no bottled water, no faucets.

All through the OT the blessings of salvation and fellowship with God are described in terms of water and its effects. Water was refreshing in the midst of unbearable heat. Water was prized because of its cooling, cleansing, thirst-quenching, invigorating, and life-giving properties. Consider these texts:

"They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights" (Psalm 36:8).

"There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High" (Psalm 46:4).

"With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Isaiah 12:3).

"For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessings on your descendants. They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams" (Isaiah 44:3-4).

Often in the OT, our need for God is portrayed in terms of physical thirst:

"As the deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Psalm 42:1-2).

"O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Psalm 63:1).

So Jesus is saying to her, as he says to you and me: "Physical thirst is the least of your problems. Physical water will only satisfy you for a short time. You may drink to your fill today, but you will be back here tomorrow, for more, and the day after that, and the day after that. More important is the thirst of your soul for what only God can give you. And that is what I offer you today."

The "water" that Jesus offers is, of course, not only himself, but also the Holy Spirit. Jesus would later say,

"Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7:38-39).

The spiritual water that Jesus offered would also include eternal life and the forgiveness of sins. It is the joy of fellowship with God, the presence of God, the joy that he brings to our hearts. We also see from this that saving faith is more than mere intellectual consent to the truth of who Jesus is and the gospel he proclaims. Faith is more than merely believing facts as true. As John Piper has said, "Faith is the quenching of the soul's thirst at the fountain of God." Faith is the heart finding ultimate satisfaction in God.

And what had this woman done to quench the thirst of her soul? She had jumped into bed with whatever man would have her. The closest thing she could find to genuine soul-satisfaction was illicit sex. She needed love, affirmation, and to know that someone cared for her and valued her as a woman. But it all left her empty and perpetually thirsty.

Consider the words of Jeremiah 2:12-13 and God's indictment against Israel:

"Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jer. 2:12-13).

Our greatest sin, this woman's greatest sin, is the rejection of the fresh, running supply of God's goodness, forgiveness, freedom, and fellowship, choosing instead the stagnant waters of cisterns that we make for ourselves. Such cisterns are cracked and full of holes and unable to provide water when we really need it. Sex, money, fame, the respect of our peers, success in the marketplace, academic achievement, possessions, all constitute the "water" that we hope to find apart from God.

But the way of the world is permanent dissatisfaction. With all its sophisticated and technological pleasures, people are perpetually bored and discontented. Leon Morris said it well:

"Surely never in the history of the race have there been so many ways of attaining pleasure, so much in the way of technical devices to make life easy and enjoyable . . . and never have so many been bored and unhappy, seeing life as a frustrating business and an exercise in futility" (134).

Worship in Spirit and in Truth

Now, let's come back to this woman. Her effort to immediately change the subject is fine with Jesus. He couldn't be more thrilled that she brings up the subject of worship. Instead of taking offense at her obviously evasive tactics, he seizes the opportunity to explain that *where* you worship doesn't matter. *Whom* you worship and *how* is the only thing that counts.

It doesn't matter if you are standing on Mt. Gerizim or kneeling in Jerusalem. It doesn't matter if you're in a gothic cathedral or a snake-infested cave. It doesn't matter if you're in OKC or in Bethlehem. Geography is utterly irrelevant. The only thing that matters is *whom* you worship and *how*.

Some of you may find v. 22 offensive. For Jesus to come straight out and say, "Your approach to worship is entirely wrong. You worship in ignorance. Your worship is worthless," sounds arrogant and elitist. But when all your efforts to be gentle and respectful of another person and their religion have reached their limits, you have to tell them the truth. Is it hateful and arrogant to tell a person with lung cancer to stop smoking? No. And trust me, there's something infinitely worse than dying of lung cancer, and that is dying spiritually and living in eternal separation from God.

"The problem, ma'am, isn't that you worship on the wrong mountain. The problem is that you don't know whom you worship. We, on the other hand, worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews."

Jesus doesn't mean by this that all Jews, simply because they are Jews, worship the one true God. Remember that later in John's gospel, chapter 8, verse 19, Jesus says to the Jewish religious leaders, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also." They didn't know God any more than did the Samaritans.

What he means, then, is that the Jewish people believed and taught that a Savior was coming into the world, the Messiah, who would bring the true knowledge of the true God and by his sacrifice for sin would make heart-felt worship possible. The Savior who makes salvation possible is a *Jewish* Messiah. You Samaritans have failed to recognize who this Messiah is and thus your worship is misguided and idolatrous.

The "hour" when authentic worship is possible, says Jesus, is "now here" because I am here!

So what does Jesus mean by saying that the Father is seeking men and women who will worship him "in spirit and truth" (v. 23)?

To say that we must worship God "in spirit" means, among other things, that it must originate from within, from the heart; it must be sincere, motivated by our love for God and gratitude for all he is and has done. Worship cannot be mechanical or formalistic. That does not necessarily rule out certain rituals or liturgy. But it does demand that all physical postures or symbolic actions must be infused with heart-felt commitment and faith and love and zeal.

But the word "spirit" here may also be a reference to the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul said that Christians "worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3). It is the Holy Spirit who awakens in us an understanding of God's beauty and splendor and power. It is the Holy Spirit who stirs us to celebrate

and rejoice and give thanks. It is the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to see and savor all that God is for us in Jesus. It is the Holy Spirit who, I hope and pray, orchestrates our services and leads us in corporate praise of God.

This worship, however, must also be “in truth.” This is easier for us to understand, for it obviously means that our worship must conform to the revelation of God in Scripture. It must be informed by who God is and what he is like. Our worship must be rooted in and tethered to the realities of biblical revelation. God forbid that we should ever sing heresy. Worship is not meant to be formed by what feels good but by the light of what is true.

Genuine, Christ-exalting worship must never be mindless or based in ignorance. It must be doctrinally grounded and focused on the truth of all we know of our great Triune God. To worship inconsistently with what is revealed to us in Scripture ultimately degenerates into idolatry.

There are some who prefer to worship only “in S/spirit” but couldn’t care less about truth. In fact, they think that focusing on truth has the potential to quench the Spirit. The standard by which they judge the success of our worship is the thrills and chills they experience. Now, make no mistake, worship that does not engage and inflame your emotions and affections is worthless. Jesus himself criticized the worship of the religious leaders in his day by saying that whereas they honored God “with their lips” their “heart is far from” him. True worship must engage the heart, the affections, the totality of our being. But any affection or feeling or emotion that is stirred up by error or false doctrine is worthless.

Others prefer to worship only “in truth” and are actually offended when they or others feel anything or experience heightened emotions. Not long ago I heard a prominent evangelical pastor whose name all of you would recognize say this: “I often wish that we wouldn’t sing or have music, but that I could simply see and say the words or the lyrics that express biblical truth. I don’t like being distracted by the emotions that rise up in me when we sing to musical accompaniment.” I couldn’t believe my ears! By all means, let us sing only what is true. But to do so without affection and feeling and heart-felt emotion is unthinkable to me.

Perhaps you’ve seen this statement by John Piper. In any case, you need to see it again:

“Truth without emotion produces dead orthodoxy and a church full . . . of artificial admirers. . . . On the other hand, emotion without truth produces empty frenzy and cultivates shallow people who refuse the discipline of rigorous thought. But true worship comes from people who are deeply emotional and who love deep and sound doctrine. Strong affections for God rooted in truth are the bone and marrow of biblical worship” (*Desiring God*, 65).

There are many who would insist that this is simply impossible. The human soul, they say, can’t hold together simultaneously such seemingly conflicting realities. You will eventually default to one side or the other. Some insist that you can’t focus on the truths of God’s Word without turning into an overly-intellectual, arrogant elitist, while others argue that you can’t cultivate heart-warming, emotionally uplifting celebrations without deviating from the Bible and falling into unbridled fanaticism. I beg to differ! Better still, Jesus begs to differ! The Bible itself begs to differ! God forbid that we should ever find ourselves individually or as a church failing to worship God in both S/spirit and truth!

Genuine, Christ-exalting worship is the fruit of both heat and light. The light of truth shines into our minds and instructs us about who God is. Such light in turn ignites the fire of passion and affection and the heat of joy, love, gratitude, and deep soul-satisfaction. Some people will inevitably conclude that there is too much emotion at Bridgeway, while others insist there is too much doctrine. Some will say we’re too experiential in our worship, while others contend that we’re too theological. Personally, I don’t think you can be too much of either, just so long as they are both embraced and God is honored.

None of this means you have to worship the way other people at Bridgeway do. If the truth of God’s Word moves you to lift your hands, dance, shout aloud, or wave a banner, God bless you. If the truth of God’s Word leads you into solemn reverence, as you remain seated and immovable, God bless you. But let’s make certain that in either case we are worshipping in both S/spirit and truth! For it is just such people that the Father is seeking.