



John 4: The Balance and Its Ultimate Outcome

“Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready.”

- Revelation 19:7

There is no better example in scripture of a perfectly balanced pastoral and theological posture than the story found in John 4. Let me detail a set of principles demonstrated by Jesus that provide the most precise guidance we could have in creating truth-rooted, love-saturated Christian schools.

John 4 English Standard Version (ESV)

Jesus and the Woman of Samaria

¹ Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John ² (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), ³ he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. ⁴ And he had to pass through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ 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]

⁷ A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) ⁹ 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.) 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.” ¹¹ 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? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.” ¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.^[b] The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” ¹⁵ 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.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” ¹⁷ The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.” ¹⁹ The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” ²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now

here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” ²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”

²⁷ Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you seek?” or, “Why are you talking with her?” ²⁸ So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, ²⁹ “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” ³⁰ They went out of the town and were coming to him.

This is one of my favorite stories in scripture because of the brilliant way Jesus reaches an outcast woman and reveals His love for her. Though there is no declaration of love in the passage, the entire narrative shows a level of compassion that not only transforms the woman and gives her a new identity, but eventually changes her whole community.

The story begins in the middle of the day at a community well. The fact that the woman comes at this time to draw water immediately tells us something: She is an outcast. In that time, women came early to draw water to have what they needed for the day and to avoid the midday heat. This woman came at a time she believed would be safe for her. To her dismay, a man was sitting by the well. Worse yet, he was Jewish (his tasseled robe would have been the giveaway). Jews hated her people as they were a mixed-blood race who synchronized traditional Jewish beliefs and practices with other religions. She would have hated the Jews as much as they hated her people. Add to that her rejected status among her own people and it would have taken all she had to continue to move toward the well.

Then began a series of completely unexpected interactions that changed her future forever. The first surprise is that Jesus humanized her by acknowledging her through a question. Even Jewish women were generally ignored by men in public due to their perceived inferior status. Jesus asks the woman by the well for a drink. He recognized not only her presence but her humanity. She was taken completely off guard and responded to him in a defensive and, most likely, hostile way.

“How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” I think she was shocked at his questions, suspicious of his motives and, therefore, brought His character into question by pointing out how wrong it was for a Jewish man to speak to a Samaritan woman.

Jesus did have a motive for his question, but it was nothing she could ever have guessed. He led her closer to an understanding of why he had chosen to draw her attention to him, by making a bold and cryptic declaration, “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.”

He did not want nor need anything from her (which was quite something considering what we learn about her later in regard to how men had used her). He actually wanted to give her something. But, at this point in the conversation, she could not even guess what he was offering her.

Confused and still feeling vulnerable and defensive, she points out how poorly equipped he was to draw water and then references Jacob as a way of shoring up her Samaritan identity.

I want to pause from reflecting on the story for a moment to illustrate an important principle in loving others while revealing truth to them. We must be prepared for initial suspicion and defensiveness and, therefore, treat them with great patience. In our era, many Westerners have only known discriminatory caricatures of what Christians are like. More than this, many have come to believe that Christians are hateful and wish only for the destruction of those who are unbelievers. When we make efforts to humanize others and lovingly speak truth into their lives, they will initially be very suspicious of our motives and respond defensively to us. We are not perceived as being safe and we are even characterized as enemies. Members of the LGBTQ+ community, especially, will have been told that we hate, dehumanize, and wish harm on them. This is how the Samaritan woman clearly felt about Jesus. So, let's continue to follow the story to see how he broke through her prejudices and convinced her that not only did he love her, but he wanted to satisfy the deepest longings of her heart.

Jesus proceeded to make an audacious claim about what he could and would do for her if she asked, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again.^[b] The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

He is not talking about meeting a need that will soon arise again. He wants to satisfy her in a permanent way and give her a way to unending satisfaction.

I think her response is both an unbelieving challenge and a mockery of his words. It is almost as if she is sneering at his offer. I think this for two reasons. The first is that by asking him to make good on his promise, she is trying to force him to concede that he can't deliver. There is no such thing as a single drink that will satisfy one's thirst for all eternity. More than this, it becomes clear that this is a very unsatisfied woman who, nevertheless, is desperate for satisfaction. Her life experience has taught her that you can't really find what you want, especially in relationships with men, so you might as well settle for whatever you get. Lower your expectations, develop a cynical outlook and you might just get by. I am convinced that as a young woman she had dreams of that one love who would satisfy her for life. But, now she had settled and what she had settled for was very little.

When one more man comes her way, this time with really ridiculous promises of what he could do for her, all she could muster was a cynical question intended to embarrass him. But she really had no idea who she was dealing with. Not only was he the greatest man who would ever live, but he was the One who knew all things. This becomes clear to her with his next statement after he asks her to get her husband.

His request for her to get her husband must have instantly made her feel intense shame and brought her off of her condescending approach. I can see her haughty eyes suddenly shutting in shame and her almost whispering, "I have no husband".

What Jesus does next is of paramount significance because he shares something only supernatural power could have revealed to him. Also, because of the fact that he knew this about her and yet he still humanized and showed respect to her, he began to melt her heart.

"You are right in saying, 'I have no husband';¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true."

This moment is worth careful thought regarding reaching others with the gospel. The world cannot understand how we can deeply value and love people who live in ways that reject our values. Once a public school board PR officer asked me bluntly, "How can you claim to love gay people, while you claim all sex outside of heterosexual marriage to be sinful?" At that moment, God gave me a way to explain this which made her understand how that can be done, though she still believed the Christian attitude to alternative lifestyles was wrong.

What I asked her was, "Do you have children?" She said she had two who were now adults. Then I asked if they ever behaved in ways that she both objected to and actively worked to discourage. As a good mother, she told me that they often misbehaved, and she often had to correct them. Finally, I asked her if the correction was motivated by hatred or love. The penny dropped and she suddenly understood from her life experience that sometimes love is the only reason for standing against someone's values and behavior.

Jesus had treated this woman as a person and not as an object for his pleasure (as most men in her life seemed to view her). He had not shunned nor demeaned her. And, he had made her an offer of fulfillment that was epic and incomprehensible to her. He knew everything about her. In her world, even among the less moral Samaritans, she was at the bottom of the social ladder. He knew this before he spoke with her and he did it anyway.

People need that kind of unconditional love today. Our students are growing up in a dystopian world in which unconditional love does not exist anymore. It is a 'one strike and you're out' society. They don't have to build a resume of immoral behavior like this woman did to be shunned. They just have to express a single unpopular opinion on social media and they will be rejected in a definitive and enduring way. Our students are terrified of the digital crowd in a way that is hard for pre-internet adults to understand.

How transformational, then, for us to offer our students the fulfillment of their deepest desires even knowing what they have done and who they really are. Our children want to be loved as they are. They hear that demand all around them, but in practice, their world puts very restrictive boundaries around acceptable behaviors, thoughts, and words and punishes them unmercifully if they do not conform.

The great irony they labor under every day is that their diversity and tolerance valuing world is one of almost totalitarian conformity and blind intolerance. Every digital native understands the rules they must comply with even if they have been conditioned to use words that hide this reality from their conscious selves. They then expect us to treat them the same way. Much of their hostility to us is a product of self-protection.

Jesus slowly, compassionately, and definitively took down the Samaritan woman's defenses by showing her that he saw her as a full human being with profound worth, despite the choices she had made. People in our world need us to communicate the same to them through our words and actions.

At this point in the story, the woman, though still defending her identity, is beginning to open herself to the possibility that this man might actually have something substantial to offer her. There is a deep question slowly rising to the surface, but before she can actually ask it, she has to be more deeply assured of how safe and authentic he is. Though it appears the statement about worship is an attempt at redirection, I think she is reminding him again of her Samaritan heritage and testing him one more time to be assured that he still accepts her despite centuries of hatred between their people.

Trust does not come quickly nor easily between people who have interacted as enemies over long periods. A known opponent will always be approached with deep suspicion, even when they have laid down their weapons. Others cannot accurately read our motives. They can only judge us by our history, words, and actions (and our current words and actions will be evaluated through our history if we have one with them). Patience is key to turning an enemy into a friend. But the absolute, most powerful way to get rid of an enemy is to turn them into a friend!

The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship."

She is now going beyond the immediate to the cosmic. She understands that Jesus is a prophet. There is no more cynicism in her statement. But he is still Jewish. In her world, Jewish prophets have no good intentions toward Samaritans. So, she reverts back to her identity in an effort to come to terms with this man and his offer of living waters. I think she was confused by his inclusive and compassionate approach to her against the hostility and dehumanization that her people had experienced from the hands of his people.

Jesus boldly takes her from her entrenched 'us and them' worldview to a new redeemed 'us' understanding of history.

²¹ Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

Jesus tells the woman that the old identities will die and in their place, a new identity will arise. People, regardless of their heritage and lifestyles, can become true worshippers of God. God is seeking people who pursue truth and approach him not from a geographical (and subsequent ethnic) perspective, but from a spiritual perspective. Jesus is actively inviting this woman into a self-awareness that transcends the boundaries and barriers that keep us from each other and from the God who is Spirit.

And now the questions burst through the surface. “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” It is clear by what happens soon after, that this woman is not just debating theology, she is communicating both a deep expectation and a desperate hope that this man is The Man that everyone is waiting for. He has already revealed things about her that no one could know. And not just her marital status, but her longing for fulfillment and acceptance. She now wants him to be the Messiah. He does something that he rarely did, especially when he was with the Jews, he tells her that he is the Messiah.

Why does he not hide it from her? Because he was confident that she would take it the right way. The Jews wanted a Messiah so he could give them the life they wanted. This woman wanted a Messiah because she wanted a person to finally serve and adore in a way that no other person was ever worthy of.

Jesus broke down her walls and identified her deepest longings. Then, he placed himself in the middle of her quest for unconditional and unending love. She really did drink of the living water that would now bubble up inside of her leaving her satisfied for eternity.

Our students are desperate for deep satisfaction, unconditional love, and secure relationships that embrace them as they are with the promise of helping them become who they really long to be (glorious beings). They are being told that we are their enemies. We disapprove of them and think of them as weak and depersonalized in their digital worlds of illusion. Like Jesus, we must humanize them. We must sit at their wells and draw them into conversation about what they want. Then, we must patiently reveal to them what Jesus came to do. We must help them understand his offer of living water, his love for them despite all he knows about them and his desire to elevate them in a way they can't even imagine.

We can only do this if we know how to start relationships with students where they are, not where we want them to be. Those of us who are theologically oriented must see clearly the needy human being in front of us and see beyond the person's self-protections to the frightened being who longs for authentic, everlasting love. Those of us who are pastorally oriented need to listen to the theologians to discover the surest path to the fulfillment of these deep desires.

We could all do better at being lifelong students of Jesus, his teachings, and his approach to people. He balanced love and truth with perfection. His truth was in love and his love was in truth. Though we will never achieve that perfect balance, either as individuals or communities before entering the New Jerusalem, we will get better and better at it as we mutually submit to and love each other from the heart. We all must focus on our Lord Jesus Christ till the dark glass between us finally melts away revealing the full glory of his face at the time after time.