



# ADULT STUDY

from *www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com*

**PARTICIPANT HANDOUT**  
Session 4

## Jesus Sees Women: An Adult Lenten Study

*The Woman Who Had Five Husbands*

### Introduction

This long story from John's Gospel is complex, as are so many of John's stories. The ancients could handle reading slowly and deeply, and that's how we must approach this text.

The story begins with conflict between John the Baptist and Jesus, for both are baptizing in Judea. The Judeans openly compared the two, to the favor of Jesus and the disfavor of John. John is very keen to avoid and openly deny any such rivalry. He has the baptizer witness over and against any such possibility of rivalry for a theological and spiritual reason: Jesus did not traffic in rivalry, envy, jealousy—all of which lead to violence—because he came to do away with all these things. Jesus' reign and ministry, which are directly from God, marked the definitive end of violence and everything that leads to violence.

In our story, Jesus' arrival at this particular well is framed as a coincidence. Jesus, John says, was tired and thirsty. This is unusual for John's Gospel—it is a rare moment of human realism. In John's Gospel, Jesus usually acted and spoke in an otherworldly way. The unnamed woman also came to the well at an odd time

of day: noon. Jesus asked her for a drink—an appropriate gesture. He is not from there, and it is not his well, so it would be stealing if he just took some water for himself.

The woman immediately questions his request, and that brings us to another point of even bigger conflict than the one in Judea with John the Baptizer. The woman was surprised by Jesus' request because, as she says, "Judeans do not share things in common with Samaritans" (v. 9). This refusal to share vessels is a very small sign of a much, much bigger conflict. To understand it, we have to go into some history.

### A History of Hate and Conflict

For four centuries before Jesus, there were separate worshiping communities in Judea and Samaria—a separation that continues to this day. The Samaritans consider themselves to be descendants of the patriarch Joseph, the one who had the many-colored coat and the dreams in Egypt. The Samaritans had their own version of the Jewish law, the Torah, written in their own language and alphabet, and they did not accept any Scriptures other than the Hebrew Scriptures, although they had other holy writings. They worshiped God and

carried out their own sacrifices in their temple on Mount Gerizim in Samaria. They believed, and still believe, that the Judean temple in Jerusalem was formed by a breakaway priest from the original temple in Samaria.

In Jesus' time, many Judeans considered the Samaritans to be not foreigners but something worse—fake Israelites. The Judeans believed that the Samaritans were ethnically mixed between Israelites and foreign settlers brought to the area by the Assyrian Empire in the eighth century BCE. The Judeans also believed that their temple in Jerusalem and their Hebrew version of the Torah were the original ones and viewed the Samaritan versions as fake copies.

Those mutual accusations of fakeness being thrown about by both sides were very serious. They prepared the way for violence, and that is exactly what happened in 113 BCE under the Judean ruler John Hyrcanus. He led an army to destroy the Samaritan temple and to devastate the surrounding lands.

So when the Samaritan woman says to Jesus, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (v. 9), she is questioning much more than just the sharing of dishes. Jews and Samaritans do not share Scriptures, worship places, ethnic origins, languages, and even God. The only thing shared between them was a history of suffering and bloodshed.

## The Gift of Living Water

Jesus responded, as he so often did in John's Gospel, by taking the discussion to a new level. He told her about a different kind of water that he could give her—living water. She didn't fully understand, for two reasons. First, the term *living water* normally refers to any kind of running water, as opposed to the still water of ponds, lakes, or wells. There are no streams in that area, which is why the people there needed the well. So her question about where to get living water was an honest one. Second, and more importantly, she didn't hear Jesus insist on the words *gift*, *give*, and *given*, so she responded thoughtlessly with the verb *get*.

Let's think about the word *give*. It's a very powerful word in the Bible. Whenever it shows up, we should notice it. In this story, the evangelist makes sure to use it three times in the same sentence.

There are three moral economies in the world: divine, human, and demonic. The human economy is

the one we are most familiar with, and it is based on getting things through buying and selling. The woman at the well responded to Jesus' first statement with the question, "Where do you *get* that living water?" (v. 11, emphasis added). Similarly, before Jesus fed the five thousand, his disciples told him to dismiss the crowd so that they could go to the nearby villages to *get* something to eat, and he responded by telling them to *give* the crowd something to eat (Mark 6:30–44).

The divine economy is based on giving and forgiving or releasing. Here are three quick examples: 1) In the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus moved his disciples and the crowd together from the human economy of getting to the divine economy of giving. 2) Jesus' parable about the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1–16 did the same thing. 3) The two verbs *give* and *forgive* are at the center of the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4). That means that the prayer grounds us, Jesus' followers, in the divine economy of giving and forgiving rather than the human one of trading and getting.

Obviously, then, the demonic economy is based on taking and destroying. This is what all empires do, in all of human history, as they expand their possessions. This is what we humans are doing to the earth as we destroy it and witness the ravages of climate change.

In John 4, Jesus was talking about way more than water, although water is still part of the conversation. He was talking about the gift of God, which includes all of life and all of eternal life as well. Everything that we humans have, do, and are, and will have, will do, and will be, is based on God's free gift. This way of looking at God and at life is entirely spiritual.

In the story, this giving talk kept going, again three more times. Jesus said, "those who drink of the water that I will *give* them will never be thirsty. The water that I will *give* will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14, emphasis added). The woman replied by changing her verbs and asking Jesus to give her this living water. The water Jesus offers is the spirit of God, not literal water. Jesus was directly offering her the grace of God. The woman didn't quite get that, because she thought that what Jesus offered could replace the well water she kept having to draw.

## The Spirit of God

Now here's an interesting point about the Spirit of God. It is sometimes associated with water in the Bible, even as something that we drink. Through the prophet Joel, repeated in the Pentecost story in Acts 2, God promises "I will *pour out* my spirit upon all flesh" (v. 17, emphasis added). In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul speaks at great length about the spiritual nature of the church, which binds all together into one body—even with all their ethnic, social, and economic differences and their different roles within the church. Paul says, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made *to drink* of one Spirit" (v. 13, emphasis added). Here in John 4, the Spirit is living water that is not a passive well that we always have to work to draw from. Instead the Spirit is an active spring bubbling up within us, freely giving us life everlasting and so fulfilling our thirst for the real life that is given by God, the spiritual life more important than the physical one that struggles to meet basic needs.

In the next part of the story, Jesus brought up another matter: the woman's many husbands. This is strange in a couple of ways. First, wasn't Jesus being kind of pushy? Is that really his business? Second, in a patriarchal society, women don't have husbands, but rather men have wives. It is the men who have the women and not the other way around.

---

## The water Jesus offers is the spirit of God, not literal water. Jesus was directly offering her the grace of God.

---

At the time of Jesus, the Samaritans were identified by Judeans with the Cuthians, a non-Jewish tribe from the east that the Assyrian Empire established (2 Kings 17) back in the eighth century BCE. They were one of five such idolatrous peoples. As Gerard Sloyan observes, "If the woman's five husbands were these peoples, the present liaison of the Samaritans . . . on Gerizim would be the sixth [man]: an idolatrous cult in Jewish eyes." The five husbands and one man Jesus referred to symbolize the Samaritans' pagan past.

Jesus himself brought up this connection, making this woman stand in as the representative of all the Samaritan people and all their history. She immediately saw that to which he was referring, and she answered him by first honoring Jesus as a prophet (i.e., a truth-teller sent by God) and then by defending her people from the slander of paganism. "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:20).

Jesus' answer was stunning, not only in the context of the religion of ancient Samaritans and Judeans, but when considered in the context of almost all ancient religions. Jesus tells her that the place of worship doesn't matter, for "the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (vv. 23–24).

## Of Mountains and Murder

This needs some unpacking. Jesus sees a combination of things that go past most modern people: mountains, sacrifice, violence, and lying. In John, the two times that Jesus goes to a mountain are when he goes to Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, first to stop the sacrifices in the temple (2:13–22), and then later to be crucified. Mountains are the places of sacrifice, and Jesus stops sacrifices with his sacrifice. The animal sacrificial systems (of the Judeans, the Samaritans, and all the pagan religions) mirror, support, and encourage the human sacrificial systems of war, empires, oppression, and poverty. Jesus knew that all of that evil and suffering is covered over with lies. The main lie is that God wanted and commanded all

this killing and oppression. So when Jesus talked about worshiping God in both spirit and truth, he meant without bloody sacrifice (whether animal or human) and without the lie that God wants this killing.

One way to put Jesus' gospel on a bumper sticker would be: "No more victims/Victims no more." We followers of Jesus are called to refuse to make victims, and I pray that all Christians would learn to follow Jesus in this way. Moreover, when others try to make victims of us, we are called to refuse to accept that role and to refuse to react with the anger and violence that

the whole victim-making process expects. With Jesus leading the way, we are victims no more in a world full of cultures that make victims. This is even—or especially—true when some of those victimizers call themselves Christian.

The Samaritan woman then hazarded a guess about Jesus, moving her assessment of him from prophet to messiah. Jesus affirmed her profession of his messianic identity—something that he doesn't do with anyone else in the Gospel! That changed her into a disciple and evangelist, and she immediately set out to tell her own people about this extraordinary visitor. Because of her faithful witness, the people of the city invited Jesus to stay with them, which he did for two more days. After hearing him for themselves, they then awarded Jesus another title: "Savior of the world."

This title is clearly important in John's Gospel, but we modern folk need some help understanding it, even if it sounds familiar to us. This title was not first applied to Jesus. Julius Caesar was the first Roman general to be titled savior of Rome. Later, his adopted son Caesar Augustus was the first emperor to carry the title savior of the world. Archaeologists found this on a stone inscription from 9 BCE in Asia Minor. This same inscription also declares that Augustus came to end war and that his coming was good news—gospel—for the whole world. So this title was applied to Jesus *after* it was first applied to Caesar.

With that fascinating piece of historical information, we can easily see what the Samaritans were saying—that Jesus is the true savior who truly ends war. This means that the emperor in Rome *is not* the true savior and *does not* truly end war. This is all the more true given that John's Gospel, like the other three Gospels, was written after the Romans had utterly devastated Jerusalem and destroyed the temple there—irrefutable proof that the Roman emperors did not end wars but made them and fostered them. The Romans had their own sacrificial temples on their own mountains in Rome, and they exported their killing, destruction, and oppression around the world, especially within Galilee and Judea.

---

## One way to put Jesus' gospel on a bumper sticker would be: "No more victims/Victims no more."

---

This title, applied by the Samaritans to Jesus, meant that they were not only accepting him as their savior but also definitively turning away from the Romans. Their acceptance of Jesus had a real cost to it, and they knew it. They didn't imagine that they could love Jesus and serve Caesar at the same time. They knew that in believing in and confessing Jesus as the Savior of the world, they no longer believed in Caesar and his empire. They would no longer fall for Caesar's lies, nor would they support his killing system.

Jesus takes the Samaritan woman at the well on an extraordinary journey, and it is to her great credit that she was ready to follow him on that journey. We, too, are called to this path. Jesus' gift of the spirit and the truth leads us not only to the true worship of God but also away from the false worship of this world's idols of fear, greed, and hate. In this way, the Samaritan woman is a good model for not only her fellow Samaritans but also for modern Christians two millennia later.

Jesus also saw this woman become an evangelist and the apostle to the Samaritans. Her witness allowed her whole community to see the new reign of God that Jesus brought, a reign that is not defined or limited by ethnic group, by political empire, or by history—and certainly not by the systems of sacrifice, debt, and death that we humans have constructed in place of God. By talking with a woman, Jesus showed how the new reign of God is created entirely from the spirit and truth.

---

*Cynthia Holder Rich and Mark Rich are on the Theology Faculty at Tumaini University Makumira, Arusha, Tanzania. Cynthia is a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) minister, and Mark is ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Previously, they have served in pastoral ministry in the United States and theological education in the United States and Madagascar.*