

## Worship in Spirit and in Truth: John 4:16-26

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

*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 worshippers 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.”

– John 4:16-26, ESV

### Introduction: Are You a Religious Person?

If someone were to ask you if you are a religious person or not, what would you say? You might ask, “What do you mean by religious?” And that would probably be a very smart response. Religion means a lot of different things to different people, and religion can be practiced in widely different ways. In John 3, Jesus had a conversation with a very observant religious man, Nicodemus, and the conversation did not seem very fruitful. Nicodemus had lots of religious and theological expertise, but he didn’t seem ready to see himself as a broken sinner in need of salvation, as a dead man in need of new birth, as a lost man in need of a Savior.

Religion based on our own knowledge and performance and without a humble awareness of our deep brokenness and our profound need for salvation is a very dangerous thing. It almost always leads to self-righteousness, arrogance, intolerance and discrimination. People who live with that kind of religious mindset can use theology as a weapon to attack others or as a shield to protect themselves from really having to deal with tough issues. Today, we’ll see Jesus confront one of the prevailing religious issues of His day, getting past the Samaritan woman’s theology-as-a-shield tactic to bring her the good news of salvation.

### A. Wounded Woman (vv. 16-19)

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Last week, we saw that Jesus was working to expose the Samaritan woman’s real thirst, so He could provide her with the living waters of saving grace and soul satisfying salvation that only He could supply. She didn’t seem to understand much of what He was saying, though. In the end, she thought He was offering her a chance to never have to come to the well and draw water, so she asked for the water. Jesus, knowing that she still didn’t understand the nature of His offer to her, decided to change tactics. He asked her to go and get her husband.

All of a sudden, the Samaritan woman, who has been very talkative, gets rather quiet. She utters just three words in the original Greek, “I-have no husband.” She provides no details or explanation as to why this might be. She doesn’t explain what happened to her husband. Based solely on her very short response, Jesus might have concluded that she was a single woman who never married.

But Jesus doesn’t fall for this dodge. He’s committed to meeting her deep needs, and to do this, she must be lovingly confronted. So Jesus says, “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.” Notice that Jesus commends her for telling the truth, which she technically did. He treats her with respect, even as He cleverly rebukes and corrects her.

We don’t know exactly what happened with the Samaritan woman’s five marriages. Most Bible commentators are quick to call her an immoral woman with a scandalously sinful past. That may be the case. Certainly, it’s hard to imagine how a woman could have been married five times previously and be living with a man who is not her husband unless she had been very immoral, probably an adulteress. One is reminded of the language regarding the adulterous woman in Proverbs. But there may be reason not to be so hasty, not to jump too quickly to that conclusion. Divorce laws in the first century only allowed men to divorce their wives, not vice-versa, and to be able to do so for almost any reason. The fact is that we just don’t know the reasons for her marriage failures, so it seems inappropriate and uncharitable to arrive at the worst possible conclusions.

What we can tell with more certainty is that the Samaritan woman is overwhelmed by shame. She comes alone to the well in the heat of the day, and at the mention of her husband, she becomes very curt and evasive in her response. But for healing to take place, medicine must be applied to the wound, and so the deep hurting places must be exposed. That is what Jesus is doing in His response to her. He is not simply trying to shame her or ridicule her. He wants to bring her shame into the open, so He can deal with it.

## **B. Worship Wars (vv. 19-22)**

She responds to His supernatural insight into her past and present shame with another dodge:

*The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.<sup>20</sup> Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.”<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.<sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.*

She does not deny the accuracy of Jesus’ statement; in fact, she affirms it by calling Him a prophet. But then she immediately shifts the topic of conversation away from husbands and toward a theological dispute over the proper location for worship. Many religious people will engage in abstract theological debates in order to avoid dealing with the real deep issues of sin and shame in their lives. If you start talking to some people about some very real and practical issue of obedience or start addressing their heart issues, they will quickly turn to a controversial theological topic.

But the woman’s re-direction toward the topic of worship was not just a dodge. She does seem genuinely interested in this question. It was a central point of dispute between Samaritans and Jews. The Samaritans pointed to Mount Gerizim as the place where both Abraham and Jacob erected altars at Shechem and was thus the first worship site in the Promised Land. The Jews, on the other hand, point back to David bringing the ark and Solomon constructing the Temple in Jerusalem, making Jerusalem the rightful place of worship.

But right worship is not a matter of geography. That may seem obvious, but this has been a central in religious disputes for millennia. When the Jews were sent into exile, taken away to Babylon, they would always pray facing Jerusalem, longing for the re-building of the Temple. Today, Muslims always pray facing Mecca and all Muslims are expected to make pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lives. In the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, people go on pilgrimage to certain sites, often to visit certain relics. Other religions, like Buddhism and Hinduism, also have holy places and pilgrimage sites, so the idea of geography being essential to worship is a pretty universal human phenomenon. And, according to Jesus, it’s completely misguided.

Jesus said God is not nearly as interested in where we stand when we worship as He is with how our hearts stand before Him. It’s not where we worship but how we worship that matters.

Before Jesus tells the Samaritan woman how God desires to be worshiped, He takes time to tell her that the Samaritans do not know God like the Jews do, and that salvation comes from the Jews. We should not see this as some sort of discriminatory, ethno-centric statement. It's not. Jesus is just speaking the truth. Because the Samaritans have only the first five books of the Scriptures, their knowledge of God is incomplete. Further, what they do know of God has been mixed with pagan superstition and the corrupt worship practices that were introduced to the Northern Kingdom under Jeroboam, who set up golden calves for the people to worship.

Telling people the truth, as Jesus is doing here, is essential to helping people know God. But truth-telling can be badly distorted, both by angry and vindictive discrimination that seeks to put others in their place and by a truth-denying political correctness that seeks to affirm all positions and all statements as equally true and valid. We must love people enough to lovingly tell them the truth, whether it is something they want to hear or not.

What does Jesus mean when He says that "salvation is from the Jews"? Well, at the simplest level, He means that He, the Savior of the World, is Jewish and comes into the world through the Jewish people.

But even more, Jesus means that He comes into the world in direct fulfillment of what has been spoken and prepared by God over the centuries through the Scriptures and through the foreshadowing of Christ in the Tabernacle and Temple worship. The oracles of the prophets and the ceremonial sacrificial worship of the priests both bring the promise of salvation to the world, and then Jesus comes to embody the fulfillment of that promise. This is why it was appropriate for people to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, but now that Jesus has come, worship will no longer be tied to geography.

### **C. Worthy Worship (vv. 23-24)**

Having addressed the Samaritan woman's mistaken ideas about worship, Jesus now tells her what kind of worship is pleasing to God:

*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."*

God is spirit is a reminder that God does not dwell in any geographical place and also a call to give God the kind of worship that is suitable to Him. Isaiah 66:1 says:

*Thus says the LORD:  
"Heaven is my throne,  
and the earth is my footstool;  
what is the house that you would build for me,  
and what is the place of my rest?"*

And in Isaiah 29:13, God criticized the worship of His people by saying,

*"Because this people draw near with their mouth  
and honor me with their lips,  
while their hearts are far from me,*

Many of God's people thought that they were worshiping God correctly by going to a certain place and speaking certain words, but God had made it clear through His prophets that such worship was not desired by Him and did not honor Him.

So Jesus instead tells the Samaritan woman that true worshipers, those whose actions are deserving of the name worship, will worship in spirit and in truth because those who want to really worship God must do so in spirit and in truth.

What does this mean, in spirit and in truth? Lots of ink has been spilled over debating and discussing the precise meaning of this expression, but it seems clear from the context that Jesus is saying that true worship must be from the heart, offered in sincerity, and according to God's word, aligned with God's truth.

Remember that Jesus has twice corrected the Samaritan woman for her rejection of the Scriptures. He said, "Had you known the gift of God" – meaning "Had you known the Scriptures" because her culture rejected 34 of the 39 books of Scripture God had given His people. Then He said, "You worship what you do not know." Why didn't the Samaritans know God? Because they rejected His word. So worship must be according to the word of God, taking in God's full revelation of Himself in all of Scripture.

Many people desire a sincere and heart-felt encounter with God, but their understanding of God is shaped by their own imagination and their own cultural biases and is not shaped by Scripture. On the other hand, many Christians seem very concerned with truth and with a very careful and accurate view of God, with right definitions and precise theology, but their worship of God can be cold, distant, merely formal, that is merely in keeping with the right outward forms.

Both overly casual worship, which seemingly denies the holiness of God and the reverence due Him, and overly formal worship, which seems disconnected from the heart and seems to obscure the love and tender mercy of God, are out-of-line. Our worship must be in spirit and in truth, heart-felt and sincere and also accurate and honoring to what God has revealed about Himself.

But what does proper worship, in spirit and in truth, have to do with this woman's shame and her bad relationships? Everything! Only a true encounter with the living God in worship can bring us the grace, love, mercy and peace to truly heal our deep brokenness and shame. Those who come hypocritically to worship leave untouched, unmoved, unhealed because they have not truly worshiped God and they have not met with God. They have only gone through the motions.

Further, it is only as we learn to worship God rightly that we can be in right relationship with others. We learned this Friday night at Bible study. Worship is foundational to good relationships. As I learn to worship God as Creator, I learn to see others as His Creation, made in His image. As I learn to worship God as the sovereign Lord, I learn to trust His control and be less controlling myself. As I learn to worship God as Savior, I begin to see my own sin and His mercy more clearly, allowing me to extend mercy to others and keeping me from trying to either judge and condemn them or trying to save them myself. I can extend to them the mercy I myself have received and can point them to the true Savior.

#### **D. Wonderful Words! (vv. 25-26)**

Once Jesus has taught the Samaritan woman about true worship, He now points her to the true Savior, as He reveals Himself to her in wonderful, powerful words:

*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." <sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."*

The Samaritan woman seems to be attempting one last dodge, one last deflection. Without denying the truth of what Jesus is saying, she tries to put Him off by telling Him that the Messiah will come and tell us all things.

Jesus' response to her is as powerful as it is brief. He doesn't say, "I am the Messiah," though that is part of what He means. He says more by saying less. By leaving out the word Messiah or Christ, Jesus ends up saying, "I am is the one speaking to you" or "I am He, the one speaking to you." or "The one speaking to you is I am"

This is actually the first "I am" statement of Jesus in the Gospel of John, even though some Bible scholars have missed it. Jesus will go on to make several more "I am" statements:

- *John 6: 35, 48 - I am the bread of life*
- *John 8: 12, 9:5 - I am the light of the world*
- *John 8:24 - unless you believe that I am he, you will die in your sins*
- *John 8: 58 - Before Abraham was, I am*
- *John 10:9 - I am the door*
- *John 10:11 - I am the good shepherd*
- *John 11:25 - I am the resurrection and the life*
- *John 14:6 - I am the way, the truth, and the life*
- *John 15:1 - I am the true vine*

In each of these, Jesus is identifying something significant about Himself, but He is also echoing God's self-disclosure to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. At the burning bush, as God is commissioning Moses to go back to Egypt and lead His people out of bondage, Moses asks God,

*"If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Ex. 3:13-14, ESV)*

This "I AM" becomes the basis for the covenant name of God in the Old Testament, *YahWeH*, which is a variation of the Hebrew expression for I am.

So, when Jesus reveals Himself to the Samaritan woman as the Messiah, He actually reveals Himself to be so much more than she would have ever expected. He is "I am." And all she needs for salvation is to truly believe Jesus' simple and profound statement. If she believes, she will receive the living water and will become a true worshiper.

### **Conclusion: Are You a Worshiper?**

So, what about you this morning? Why are you here? Have you come out of a sense of obligation or habit? Is there some cultural pressure or some family expectation driving you here? Are you here to worship God? Are you here because you believe in Jesus?

Those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth, coming with sincere hearts of faith and in alignment with what God has revealed about Himself in His word. Those who come to worship God in spirit and in truth do so by the power of His grace changing our hearts and aligning them with His and thus come in worship and encounter God and are forever changed by the encounter:

- Sin and shame are laid bare and met with mercy and grace.
- Loneliness and despair are laid open and met with love and hope.
- Arrogance and presumption are laid open and are turned by God's Spirit to humility and repentance.

Don't waste the time God gives you on the Lord's Day, as we gather to worship Him. Come prepared to meet with Him. Come expecting to receive from Him. Come offering sincere worship from your heart to Him. Come and let Him meet with you and do in you the work which only He can do. And may He be glorified in our worship, in spirit and in truth!