

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #4: HOW JESUS PRACTICED EVANGELISM

By John Temples

Sharing the gospel with others is a responsibility of every Christian, to the degree that their abilities and opportunities permit. But few actually do it, for several reasons. Perhaps they think “that’s the preacher’s job.” The biggest reason by far, though, is the intimidation or inadequacy factor--we are afraid of rejection, or of being asked a question we cannot answer.

Fortunately, the Bible “thoroughly equips” each of us for service to God, and that includes evangelism. One of the best ways it does so is by giving us accounts of actual soul-winning encounters. So now, let’s go to the ultimate example of soul-winning proficiency. Let’s look at how Jesus did evangelism.

When you come right down to it, all evangelism is done one on one--one person persuading another person to obey Jesus. Or, as one writer put it, one beggar telling another beggar where to find food!

Much of the Lord’s teaching was done on a mass scale, to large crowds. But in John’s gospel, we have a true gem: a detailed account of Jesus one on one with a lost person--just Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. The record is found in John 4:5-30. That’s a lengthy quote, so we’ll just note verses as we discuss them.

STEP ONE OF JESUS’S METHODOLOGY: HE WENT WHERE THE SINNERS WERE

To avoid conflict between His followers and those of John the Baptist, Jesus left Judea and went to Galilee for a time. Samaria was located between Judea and Galilee. The shortest route would have been through Samaria; but most Jews took a roundabout way, crossing the Jordan River to avoid contact with the Samaritans, with whom they had a longstanding feud. Jesus, however, purposely sought contact with them.

“So He came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Now Jacob’s well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from His journey, sat thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour [noon, the hottest part of the day]” (John 4:5,6).

This teaches us that we need to leave our comfort zones and get out in the marketplace. Remember, the first word of the Great Commission is “go.” One caveat: we are not saying Christians ought to go to questionable or disreputable places where our presence might be misinterpreted or our reputation compromised. Some think we ought to go to bars, rock concerts, beaches, etc. and try to reach people in those situations. While such intentions are noble, people in bars or at rock concerts or at the beach are likely in a very unreceptive state of mind. Quiet and/or morally neutral locations are greatly to be preferred.

STEP TWO: HE INITIATED THE CONVERSATION BY ASKING FOR A FAVOR

Verse 7 says, “A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, Give me a drink.” No doubt many of us have agonized over how to start a spiritual conversation with a prospect. Here’s one way: **ask a favor**. Start with something physical or mundane.

A remarkable truth has been demonstrated time and time again: you can disarm many a tense situation or break the ice in a social encounter by saying, “Can you help me?”

STEP THREE: HE BROKE DOWN BARRIERS ERECTED BY THE WOMAN

Verse 9: “Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman? For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.”

When you start trying to change people, they resist. Their psychological defense mechanisms kick in. And they start throwing up barriers. The first one in this case was **racial or cultural differences**.

How did Jesus overcome this initial barrier? **He ignored it.** He did not debate the issue. As long as it involves a racial, physical, or cultural situation that is irrelevant as far as God is concerned, just let it go.

STEP FOUR: HE TURNED THE CONVERSATION TO SPIRITUAL MATTERS

“Jesus answered and said to her, If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water” (verse 10).

Small talk is good, but at some point, you’re going to have to shift the subject to salvation. Don’t make the transition forced or abrupt. (Don’t be like the Christian who was having lunch with a friend and said, “Boy, this fish is delicious. By the way, you wouldn’t like to discuss baptism, would you?”)

Here we need to be wise and tactful. But just pray for God to give you an opening, and He will do it.

STEP FIVE: HE OVERCAME THE BARRIER OF SHALLOW THINKING AND IGNORANCE OF SPIRITUAL THINGS

Verses 11 and 12 say, “The woman said to Him, Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water? Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?”

This woman was like many do today: she thought only on a physical level. She probably thought Jesus was just another bottled-water salesman, offering her some “magic potion.” Nicodemus had the same problem. Jesus told him he needed to be born again to enter the kingdom; he thought Jesus was talking about a physical rebirth.

How did Jesus deal with this barrier? He pointed out the difference between the earthly and the heavenly, between the material and the spiritual. “Jesus answered and said to her, Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life” (verses 13,14).

Jesus accomplished two things with this statement: He gently began to raise the woman's level of thinking from the mundane to the spiritual, and He also began to stimulate her desire for this "living water."

The woman partially understood, and said, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw" (verse 15). Observe the power of Jesus's method-- within a few minutes, the situation has gone from Jesus asking her for a drink of water to her asking Him!

She still did not fully grasp what "living water" was (she still thought Jesus was offering her some physical water with magical properties), but at this point she was fully engaged.

STEP SIX: HE BROUGHT UP THE SIN ISSUE

"Jesus said to her, Go, call your husband, and come here. The woman answered and said, I have no husband. Jesus said to her, You have well said, I have no husband. For you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly" (verses 16-18).

Before people can obey the gospel, they must repent of sin and abandon sinful relationships and situations. Maybe we don't make this clear enough to potential Christians. We hesitate to tell them that they are going to have to completely change their lives. We sing "All Things Are Ready" or "Just As I Am" and emphasize how quickly and easily they can be baptized. Yes, you can come "just as you are," but you can't stay that way!

We need to think in terms of, "I need to make sure this person understands that I'm not just talking about changing a few habits or attending some pep talks--I'm talking about a total change of life and reordering of priorities."

How did the woman react to this? She did what any normal person would do when confronted with personal sin: **she changed the subject!** "The woman said to Him, Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship" (verses 19,20). How did Jesus respond?

STEP SEVEN: HE DEALT WITH THE BARRIER OF DOCTRINAL MISUNDERSTANDING AND FALSE TEACHING

“Jesus said to her, Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know. We know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (verses 21-24).

Verse 24 is a crucial verse. Here is how many people think it reads: “God is a kind old fellow, and those who worship Him may worship any way they please.” This is how it actually reads: “God is Spirit, and those who worship **MUST** worship Him in spirit and in truth.”

To a lot of people today, “must” means “may,” and worship means “whatever.” They have this warm/fuzzy feeling about God, and think that they can live any way they please and God will take them in, because He’s such a loving fellow.

Notice that Jesus flatly told this woman, “You and your people are wrong.” That sound you hear is mouths opening with astonishment! If you say “you are wrong” today, you set off fireworks and send people hunting for safe spaces and grief counseling. But if people are never confronted with their personal sin, they will never see any reason to change their situation.

What was the woman’s reaction? Verse 25: “The woman said to Him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming (who is called Christ). When He comes, He will tell us all things.’” She was not put off by the Lord’s plain speech; rather, she was even more eager to receive the truth. Also notice that by this time, she was fully in “spiritual mode”--she had left the idea of physical water behind. She has progressed from seeking “water” to “living water” to “all things spiritual.”

STEP EIGHT: HE PLAINLY IDENTIFIED AND POINTED THE WOMAN TO THE MESSIAH (HIMSELF)

“Jesus said to her, I who speak to you am He” (verse 26). We can (and must) talk to people about the church, and baptism, and instrumental music, etc.; but ultimately it’s all about Jesus. Our faith must be centered in Him. People must learn and acknowledge that there is one God, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. They must read John 14:6--”I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through Me.” There are not many roads to heaven. There is only one: Jesus and His gospel. Human saviors, doctrines, and religious organizations must be disavowed.

WHAT WAS THE RESULT OF THIS ENCOUNTER?

“The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ? Then they went out of the city and came to Him” (verses 28-30). Here is a marvelous thing: the evangelized one became the evangelist!

So here is how Jesus practiced one-on-one evangelism:

- He went where the sinners were.
- He started a conversation based on a simple, physical human need or situation. (“Can you help me?” is one of the best openers.)
- He overcame the barriers that normally divide people (such as race) by ignoring them.
- He seized an opportunity to turn the conversation from the material to the spiritual.
- He overcame the barrier of spiritual ignorance (He explained the difference between physical water and living water).
- He got the matter of sinful life situations out in the open.
- He dealt with the issues of false doctrines and false religions.
- He made it plain that salvation is only through Him--there are not multiple ways to heaven.

POSTSCRIPT: THE WATERPOT

Verse 28 contains an incidental but beautiful and meaningful statement: “She left her waterpot.” That’s a lovely metaphor for what happens when you leave the things of the world behind and come to Jesus. She came carrying a heavy burden;

she left free of it. She came to meet a physical need, and had a greater spiritual need met.

Come to think of it, people were always leaving things behind when they came to Jesus! Observe:

- “[Simon and Andrew] immediately left their nets and followed Him” (Matthew 4:20).
- “And immediately He called them [James and John] and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and went after Him” (Mark 1:20).
- “After these things He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, ‘follow Me.’ So he left all, rose up, and followed Him” (Luke 5:27,28).
- When Paul met Jesus, he left his whole Jewish existence behind.

And the Samaritan woman left her waterpot. Did she go back eventually and retrieve that pot? Yes, almost certainly; she would still get physically thirsty even after satisfying her spiritual thirst. We all have physical needs and responsibilities that do not magically go away when we become Christians. But those things take on a new meaning--they become acts and means of service done to the Lord.

Folks, here is power. Study the methods of Jesus and use them to become a better soul winner. If we can summon the courage to speak to a loved one, or even a stranger, about the salvation Christ offers, it can change both our lives and untold numbers of other lives, even many years later.

In a future article, we will look at how the inspired apostles practiced evangelism, that we may be even better equipped to fulfill the Great Commission. --John Temples