

Encounters with Jesus: The Insider and the Outcast Sunday, 1/15/23

Last week we considered the case of the skeptical disciple and asked ourselves how skepticism and biases may color our perception of God's work in our lives. Jesus can handle our questions. Can we handle his answers?

Today we'll look at two very familiar stories that are usually treated separately, but when seen together can help us to answer the big question, what is wrong with this world? It's a timeless question, isn't it? How many times in the last year have you asked yourself that after a particularly shocking story in the news or a nasty encounter with some of the worst of human behavior in the course of your day? What is wrong with this world?

The answer, of course is sin, but that word is so loaded with freight that we can hardly hear it anymore without seeing images of judgmental Christians and pulpit-pounding preachers, Nothing says "come and experience the grace and love of Jesus" like a preachy condemnation of our failings, right? And so sin has really fallen out of favor as a conversation topic because nobody likes to be judged. That's really too bad because sin really is what's wrong with this world. We just need to broaden our understanding of what sin means. John helps us do that by contrasting the lives of two people who couldn't possibly be more different, yet faced the same root problem and the one possible solution. We'll start with the Samaritan woman that Jesus met at the well.

The woman at the well is one of the Biblical figures that we've come to associate with our concept of sin, along with the woman brought to Jesus after having been caught in the act of adultery. Both women were guilty of sexual sins, which have always seemed to carry even more judgmental weight for us than other sins. And incidentally, isn't it remarkable that it's always been the women who have been judged for their sexual sin, and not the men that they sinned with?

In some ways, the sin of the woman at the well has become easier for us to dismiss as the centuries and decades have passed us by. That's true because Americans, like the Europeans before them, have come to radically new understandings of what's right and wrong in sexual relationships. In particular, according to the Pew Research Institute, the rate of cohabitation among American couples without marriage has more than doubled over the

last thirty years.¹ Until recently, I would have told you that all of the couples that I work with in premarital counseling are cohabitating when they come to me. And that was true. But the contemporary reality is that even fewer couples are choosing to get married, and those that are find it more convenient or meaningful to do so outside of the church building. So from the vantage point of 2022, it hardly seems very scandalous that the woman at the well wasn't married to the man she was living with. What would have shocked a first-century reader can leave us with a mental shrug.

Still, we have enough other clues in the reading to understand that the woman was an outsider. She came to the well at noon, so we surmise that she had been cast out of the social circle of women who normally came to the well in the morning. She was a Samaritan, which means she was descended from the group of Jews who stayed behind during the Babylonian exile and intermarried with Canaanites. In the eyes of Jerusalem Jews, she would have been seen as a heretic.² Even so, what's that to us. Few of us would identify ourselves as outcasts or heretics, and even fewer of us as sinners.

To better understand her situation, let's compare it with that of Nicodemus, a person who 1st Century Judaism would have identified as being and doing all the right things to be in an upstanding relationship with God. I'm reading from the Gospel of John in the third chapter, beginning with verse 1 in the New Living Translation. [{Read John 3:1-7 NLT}](#)

From the outside looking in, it's clear that Nicodemus had all the right things going for him. He was a man in a male-dominated social, political, and religious world. He was a Pharisee, which meant that we was extremely well-educated and that he most likely paid particular attention to keeping even the smallest details of God's law as recorded in the Torah. By the standards of 1st century Judaism, he was the last person anyone would have judged to be a sinner. And yet it's clear from what Jesus said to him that in the eyes of God, he was no less in need of God's grace than the woman at the well. But how can that be?

The confusion here comes from our definition of sin, which tends to be loosely tied to our contemporary sense of morality or perhaps a list of wrong behaviors. Instead, the Bible reminds us that sin is looking to something or someone other than Jesus for our purpose and

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/10/05/rising-share-of-u-s-adults-are-living-without-a-spouse-or-partner/>

² Timothy Keller. *Encounters with Jesus*, p. 25. Penguin, 2013.

direction in life. As Timothy Keller put it, “[s]in is looking to something else besides God for your salvation. It is putting yourself in the place of God, becoming your own savior and Lord, as it were.”³ In other words, sin is defined by neither contemporary fashions in behavior nor laundry lists of dos and don’ts that we can memorize and perform to by rote. The later is what Nicodemus was trying to do. He was making an idol out of God’s law, worshipping God’s law instead of relying on a personal relationship with the living God. The woman at the well was equally sinful, just in a different way. Perhaps she was worshipping the security that came from being in a relationship instead of depending on God for what she needed. There’s nothing wrong with being in a relationship. They can be gifts from God. There’s nothing wrong with studying God’s law. Jesus is, after all, the perfect fulfillment of God’s law. What is wrong- what is, in fact, sin- is to look to anyone or anything before God to guide and define your life.

What’s your particular Golden Calf? I can relate to all of the labels on this particular calf. The older I get, the more seductive comfort becomes as a competitor with God’s voice. The comfort of my recliner is taking on a new priority! My family hasn’t become any less important to me over the years, and the reality is that we don’t all follow Jesus. That can be awkward and uncomfortable, and sometimes I find myself making compromises at family gatherings. And money has always been a tempting thing to worship. I’m retiring in six months, so you’d better believe that I’ve spent more time thinking about money than usual, which feeds my idol of security.

How about you? Which idol are you worshipping? Is it approval? Pleasure? Entertainment? Power? None of these things are inherently bad. What’s wrong is when we allow them to guide us in our life choices and expect them to provide meaning and fulfillment.

Fortunately, there is a solution to our problem. Jesus described it to the woman at the well as “living water...a fresh, bubbling spring within [us], giving [us] eternal life.”⁴ To Nicodemus, he described it as being “born again...born of water and the Spirit.”⁵ Isn’t it

³ Ibid, p. 35.

⁴ John 4:10, 14. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

⁵ John 3:3, 5. Ibid

interesting that in both cases he used the metaphor of water to represent the life of unreserved faith in Jesus? Why is that?

First, I think it's because water is such a common and essential thing, something everyone experiences and everyone needs to live. In fact, the most abundant part of our physical bodies is water.

Second, I think it's because water was associated the Holy Spirit and the baptism of Jesus. When we dunk (or sprinkle or splash) a person in the waters of baptism, we remember and reenact that moment when Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. Washing with water dramatically illustrates on the outside what God's Spirit mysteriously does for us on the inside. The water also is a reminder that in baptism we die to our old life apart from Christ and are reborn as a part of the Body of Christ, the Christian Church. By definition, any Christian is really a "born-again" Christian, given new life in the Holy Spirit.

Remember, though, that it's not all about baptism. Don't assume that just because you were baptized that you've been saved. To assume that would be to make the same mistake as Nicodemus, to worship religious ritual and law.

Nicodemus and the woman at the well needed to be reborn. They needed to trade the ordinary water of what they were worshipping for the living water of Jesus. That's what was wrong with them. That's what wrong with the world- we're worshipping the wrong things! And that's what's wrong with each one of us. What we need is what they needed, a life surrendered to Jesus, reborn and radically reoriented to the perspective and power of Jesus.

Jesus doesn't want to be your Facebook Friend. Jesus wants to be your Lord and savior. Jesus can be a good friend, but first you have to make the decision to turn away from serving yourself and seek to serve God. What's holding you back isn't that you're not keeping the rules perfectly. Your problem is that you're worshipping too many other things than Jesus. That's the bad news. The good news is that the Spirit of God is just waiting to rush into your heart and get to work, giving you a spiritual rebirth through living water. Do you want that? Do you want that more than the idols you've been chasing instead?

What idol are you ready to sacrifice in your worship of God? Ask God to help you do that today.



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