

Personal Evangelism 101: Take Initiative

Scripture: John 4:6–9

Code: B130521

As believers, we're often surrounded by people who have no interest whatsoever in God or His Word. That indifference can be a significant barrier to our evangelistic efforts—how do we effectively bring the gospel to a world that doesn't want to hear it?

The fourth chapter of the gospel of John provides us with a potent example of effective personal evangelism from the life of Christ. Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well gives us several valuable principles for approaching people with the gospel—people with no inherent interest in it.

The first lesson that stands is that He took initiative. He didn't wait for the woman to ask Him about who He was or how she might receive eternal life. In fact, she didn't even understand her own spiritual need when they began talking.

Their interaction begins in verse 6 with Christ resting alone outside the city of Sychar in Samaria.

So Jesus, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour. There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) (John 4:6-9)

While this story is familiar to most believers, our twenty-first century eyes and ears often miss some of the shocking elements of that simple interaction. But her response to Jesus is a clear indication that this was not a normal or casual conversation.

To begin with, it's shocking that a Jewish man would strike up a conversation with a woman He didn't already know. Unrelated men and women did not openly mingle in the culture of New Testament Israel—and even relatives kept their interaction to a polite minimum. The standard for rabbis and religious leaders was even stricter, with some of them going as far as averting or closing their eyes and never even *looking* at a woman in public.

But it wasn't just gender difference that stood between them—this woman was a Samaritan. Most Jews wouldn't even *walk through* Samaria much less talk to Samaritans. The ethnic animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans went back hundreds of years. You can read in 2 Kings 17 how the Assyrians invaded Samaria, took most of the Israelites into captivity, and repopulated the area with people from a variety of pagan nations. The Samaritans were the descendants of the Israelites who had intermingled with the pagan Gentiles, adopting their cultures and religions.

That meant that in the eyes of the Jews, Samaritans were worse than other Gentiles. In fact, just calling someone a Samaritan was one of their harshest epithets (cf. John 8:48). They had sacrificed

their racial purity and corrupted their worship—we'll see more about that later in this series.

In a short parenthetical statement, John explains that Jews had no dealings with Samaritans (John 4:9). Christ's request for a drink was a shock to the woman because it shattered those ethnic barriers.

There was another barrier that Jesus broke through to bring this woman the gospel, and it's only hinted at in the passage above. John 4:6 says "it was about the sixth hour." And since the Jewish day began at dawn, the sixth hour would mean this story starts sometime around noon—a highly unusual time to be drawing water from a well. Usually the women would go in large groups to draw their water at dusk.

So why was this woman alone? As we discover later in the story, she had several failed marriages in her past, and was currently living with a man she was not married to (John 4:17-18). In short, she was the kind of woman other women did not associate with—an outcast within her community.

Christ was already aware of her sin before He ever spoke to her, but it wouldn't be a hindrance to Him. Just as He broke through the societal and racial barriers, He didn't allow the woman's sinful lifestyle to inhibit His ministry to her.

It can be difficult to have that attitude in a society that celebrates sin the way ours does. In fact, it's easy to resent outspoken sinners for their immorality, and especially for their advocacy of immorality in others. But they are not the enemy; they're the mission field. We can't be like Jonah, who tried to withhold salvation from the sinful people of Ninevah. We can't keep our distance—it's our responsibility to pursue them for their sakes and the sake of the gospel.

Instead, we need to be like Christ, who overcame His lack of a natural, obvious connection to this outcast Samaritan woman, aggressively invading her day to bring eternal truth to bear on her life.

We don't often think about evangelism in terms of aggression, but we should. We can't sit back and wait for evangelistic opportunities to fall into our laps. We need to take initiative by aggressively looking for ways to bring the life-transforming truth of Scripture to bear in conversations, relationships, and every other circumstance. Don't look for periodic opportunities for evangelism in the course of your life—*your life is your evangelistic opportunity*.

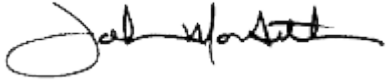
One last thing: Christ had every traditional and religious advantage on this woman. He wasn't a woman, He wasn't a Samaritan, and He wasn't an adulterous outcast. But in spite of His societal superiority, He puts Himself into her debt by asking for a drink. It's a beautiful condescension, as He breaks traditional and ethnic etiquette to engage this woman in a conversation that will transform her life.

In many ways, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is the opposite of His interaction with Nicodemus in John 3. Nicodemus was an elite religious leader, and he had seen Christ's miracles and heard His teaching. His pursuit of the truth led him to Christ, and ultimately to saving faith.

The Samaritan woman had no such interest in Christ—she didn't know who He was or what He taught. She was spiritually ignorant and indifferent. For all we know, her spiritual need was the

furthest thing from her mind.

And yet Christ took the initiative and intervened. It wasn't merely a casual encounter—it was a divine appointment, and He was going to make the most of it. We need to cultivate the same attitude in our own lives, and aggressively create opportunities to preach God's truth to the people around us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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