

Personal Evangelism 101: Identify Spiritual Needs

Scripture: John 4:9–10

Code: B130522

It would be wonderful if unsaved people eagerly came to you with their questions about salvation and eternal life, but that's not likely to happen very often, if ever.

Instead, you will need to initiate the majority of the evangelistic opportunities in your life. You'll need to look for ways to steer conversations with spiritually uninformed and indifferent people back to God's eternal truth. You have to give them a reason to listen and care about what you're saying.

We're looking at a powerful example of that in a familiar story from the life of Christ. The fourth chapter of John describes Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well. We already saw how He took the initiative in starting the conversation, in spite of all the traditional and religious barriers that stood between them. The simple act of asking the woman for a drink was shocking in that culture, and in just a few short words Jesus had her full attention.

But as we'll see today, it wasn't enough just to get the conversation going—Christ immediately steers their discussion to her spiritual needs.

The Samaritan woman was already reeling from His shocking request for a drink. John recounts her incredulity at the situation:

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.) 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." (John 4:9-10)

Christ's request for a drink caught the woman off guard, but it also created a point of contact between them. Everyone can relate to physical thirst and the need for water. Jesus simply used those basic human experiences to kick start a discussion about her spiritual need.

And to illustrate her desperate need, He uses a familiar but potent analogy: water. Not only was it the point of contact for their interaction, it was an apt illustration of her spiritual need—one with Old Testament foundations. Jeremiah 17:13 describes how Israel had "forsaken the fountain of living water, even the Lord." Speaking about the lovingkindness of the Lord in Psalm 36:9, David says, "For with you is the fountain of life." Isaiah 12:3 talks about the redeemed "joyously draw[ing] water from the springs of salvation."

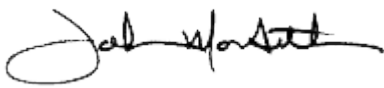
The conversation with the Samaritan woman wasn't the only time Christ referred to Himself as the source of living water. In John 6:35 He says, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst." Just a chapter later in John 7:37, Jesus told the crowd in Jerusalem, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink."

Water is precious and vital for life, and in the world of the New Testament it was not easy to come by. But Christ wasn't offering to quench anyone's physical thirst. He had their spiritual needs in mind, and the analogy of water made it clear how strong those needs were.

That's really the essence of evangelism. You locate a common point of reference or interest and begin a conversation, anticipating how you can direct that conversation toward eternal matters. Regardless of the topic or the venue, even the most casual conversations can have an eternal purpose. It's our job to keep watch for opportunities to inject God's truth into everyday discussions, just as Christ did with the Samaritan woman.

In this case, Christ took the initiative to start a conversation, then immediately turned the tables on the woman, identifying her as the one in need of the kind of water only He could supply. He's addressing a need she's unaware she has, and making a divine offer of unsolicited mercy to fulfill that need.

And that's where we'll pick it up next time.

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

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