

# LEARNING FROM JESUS (PART I)

Do you think of Jesus as a preacher and an evangelist? We don't normally think of Jesus as a preacher, yet he preached: "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matt. 4:17). And we don't often think of him as an evangelist, yet he shared the good news: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14-15). I suppose the reason we don't think of Jesus as an evangelist is because he was not only a messenger of the gospel, but in a very real sense he *was* the gospel.

Jesus didn't have to go around explaining the God-man-Jesus-response message. The reason is rather simple: he lived in a context in which that wasn't necessary. The Jews that he met already believed in God and sin, and they were anticipating the Messiah. They knew the Old Testament passages that spoke of the Son of David, the Son of Man, and the Suffering Servant. Jesus simply had to indicate that he was the long-awaited One who would fulfill these Old Testament prophecies. When people believed in Jesus, they were putting their faith in his gospel message. When they rejected Jesus, they were rejecting the gospel.

With this in mind, let us look at how Jesus approached sinners, those who were lost and in need of salvation. No one in the Bible did this more than Jesus did. As Jerram Barrs observes, "If we stop and think practically about this issue, it is . . . clear that by far the greatest number of passages in the Bible that describe encounters with unbelievers, and the communication of truth to them, come in the four Gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus."<sup>1</sup>

As Christians, we should all want to be more like Jesus. He is not merely an example, but in many ways, he serves as the perfect example of how to obey God. "He is the best example of how we are to live before unbelievers and how we are to love them, serve them, and speak truth to them."<sup>2</sup>

## THE WOMAN AT THE WELL (JOHN 4)

This famous passage has much to say about worship and Jesus' identity. But it is also a great example of how Jesus crossed the barriers of race, religion, gender, and sin in order to save the lost.

<sup>1</sup> Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John <sup>2</sup> (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), <sup>3</sup> he left Judea and departed again for Galilee.

<sup>4</sup> And he had to pass through Samaria. <sup>5</sup> So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup> Jacob's well was

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<sup>1</sup> Jerram Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

there; so Jesus wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. (John 4:1-6)

Jesus had been in Judea, not far from Jerusalem, when the Pharisees heard about Jesus' growing ministry. Perhaps to avoid conflict with that group of men, Jesus departed for Galilee, to the north. The region between Judea and Galilee was Samaria.

This region had once been part of the united kingdom of Israel. Following Solomon's death, the kingdom split into two kingdoms: Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Assyria besieged Israel and captured Samaria (the name of the capital of the northern kingdom), taking some of the Israelites into exile. After Samaria was captured, foreigners came into the land and settled there (2 Kgs. 17:24). These foreigners intermarried with the surviving Israelites. Therefore, Samaritans were of mixed race and Jews viewed them as unclean half-breeds.

The Samaritans had their own form of Scripture, which was a corrupted form of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). The Samaritan Pentateuch said that Mount Gerizim was the place of worship and around 400 BC, the Samaritans built a temple there, one to rival the temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritans' temple was destroyed in the second century BC, but they continued to believe that worship was supposed to be conducted on Mount Gerizim.

What is important is the view that Jews had towards Samaritans. "In Jesus' time the Jews hated the Samaritans even more than they despised 'pure' Gentiles, for they regarded them as polluting the blood of the patriarchs."<sup>3</sup> When the Jewish leaders tried to slander Jesus, they asked him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" (John 8:48).

It has been said that Jews avoided traveling through Samaria at all costs. This is not quite true. Many Jews passed through Samaria when traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem, because it was the shortest route. Some would cross the Jordan River and travel on the eastern side, but this was Gentile territory. Some commentators believe that the statement, "he had to pass through Samaria" (John 4:4), indicates that Jesus had a divine appointment. The Father wanted him to speak to this woman.

Jesus had been traveling for several hours with his disciples and it was now noon. He would have been tired and thirsty. It would have been natural for him to seek a well so that he could have a drink.

<sup>7</sup> A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."<sup>8</sup> (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.)<sup>9</sup> The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)<sup>10</sup> Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."<sup>11</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"<sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 38.

sons and his livestock.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,<sup>14</sup> but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”<sup>15</sup> The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.” (John 4:7-15)

It was about noon. Usually, women came in groups to the well, and they often came earlier or later in the day, when the heat of the sun was not as strong and oppressive. This particular woman was probably ostracized by her community because of her immoral life. Jesus, left alone by the disciples, does not ostracize the woman. Rather, he asks her for some water.

The woman is incredulous. How can a Jewish man ask a Samaritan woman for water? Jesus is transgressing two boundaries at once. John lets his readers know that Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. But here, Jesus is alone with a foreign woman.

Though Jesus asks the woman for a drink, he is the one who has something to offer. He lets her know that he is someone special who has come to give “living water.” John 7:37-39 makes it clear that this living water is the Holy Spirit. The woman at first does not understand what Jesus is saying. She thinks in narrowly literal terms. “How can you give me water if you have nothing to draw it with?” Jesus lets her know that what he is offering will satisfy her completely. It is unlike anything else in this world. By describing what he offers in this way, Jesus is presenting the gospel to this woman in a very positive light. Of course, it is not the full gospel, but what he says makes her interested in learning more.

As we will now see, Jesus could have condemned her for her sinful life, but he does not. He treats her like a human being, with dignity and respect. She is one that he made in his image. (Jesus is the co-creator of the universe. How wonderful to think of him entering into his own creation and interacting with people he made!) Though that image is marred by sin, it is not beyond redemption.

<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.”<sup>17</sup> The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’;<sup>18</sup> for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.” (John 4:17-19)

Now we learn this woman’s secret. She has had five husbands and is now living with another man. This is probably why she is alone at the well in heat of day. Mack Stiles believes she may have been at the well hoping to find yet another man, one traveling through town.<sup>4</sup> This woman could have interpreted Jesus’ request for water as flirtation.<sup>5</sup> Jesus tells her to go find her husband. He may be doing this in an effort to repel any possible advances she is making. But he

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<sup>4</sup> J. Mack Stiles, *Speaking of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 112.

<sup>5</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 272.

also reveals his knowledge of her life, which is made clear in verses 17-18. Again, Jesus does not condemn, but he brings her sin into the light.

<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” <sup>25</sup> 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.” (John 4:19-26)

Since Jesus knows about the woman’s sins and is able to tell her how many husbands she had, she assumes that he is a prophet. The woman then switches to a theological topic. This may or may not be a smokescreen. In other words, it is possible that she wants to leave the very personal topic of her sin and move on to something more theoretical and impersonal, like proper worship practices. Nevertheless, Jesus answers her and in so doing, he teaches us something very important about worship.

Jesus tells her that soon worship will not be limited to Mount Gerizim or Jerusalem, or anywhere else. True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. I think it is accurate to say that true worshipers will worship the Father through the Truth (Jesus, our great high priest) by the power of the indwelling Spirit. Jesus is teaching this woman that true worship will go through him, the true temple, and will be enabled by the Spirit that he will soon give to his followers. Thus, Jesus answers the woman’s comment about worship, but he does so in a way that leads her to consider him as the true object of worship.

Jesus’ revelation about true worship prompts the woman’s comment about Messiah/Christ (the Hebrew/Greek words for “the anointed one”). It seems that she is beginning to understand who Jesus is. Lest she (or we) miss the point, Jesus tells her that he is indeed the Messiah. This is his way of sharing the gospel with her.

Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you seek?” or, “Why are you talking with her?” (John 4:27)

When the disciples return, they cannot believe that Jesus is talking to a Samaritan *woman*. What is he doing? Why is he talking with her? Of course, the disciples do not say such things, but they think them. Ironically, their attitudes were much like the Pharisees, who couldn’t understand why Jesus spent time with sinners. Some rabbis considered talking to women and teaching them a waste of time—how much more a Samaritan woman!

<sup>28</sup> So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, <sup>29</sup> “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” <sup>30</sup> They went out of the town and were coming to him. (John 4:28-30)

After the disciples interrupt her conversation with Jesus, the woman hurries off into town to tell people about this amazing man. Her encounter with Jesus and her subsequent reaction provide a model for telling others about Jesus. If we are so captivated by Christ, we should tell others, too.

<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” <sup>32</sup> But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” <sup>33</sup> So the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought him something to eat?” <sup>34</sup> Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.” <sup>35</sup> Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. <sup>36</sup> Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. <sup>37</sup> For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ <sup>38</sup> I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.” (John 4:31-38)

At first glance, this conversation may seem unrelated to Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman. But notice how the disciples, like the woman, are focused on literal nourishment, while Jesus is directing them to greater truths. The woman thought Jesus was talking about well water, when he was talking about the Holy Spirit. Now the disciples are thinking about food while Jesus is thinking about his Father’s mission.

When Jesus says, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work,” he may be referring to Deuteronomy 8:3b: “man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” The Father’s will is what sustains Jesus. He tells his disciples that there is a crop ready for harvest. The “crop” refers to those who will become followers of Jesus. The disciples need to reap the labor that God has prepared through his prophets, from Abraham to John the Baptist and even Jesus himself.

<sup>39</sup> Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, “He told me all that I ever did.” <sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. <sup>41</sup> And many more believed because of his word. <sup>42</sup> They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.” (John 4:39-42)

Now look at the results of Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman. She went to tell others in town what Jesus had told her. Many Samaritans came to faith through this

woman's testimony. Jesus stayed in town for two days, preaching the word to them. Ultimately, many came to faith through Jesus' words.

### **Learning from Jesus**

We can learn many things from Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. The first and most obvious is Jesus' willingness to cross all kinds of barriers to reach this woman. We must not forget how a Jewish male would have viewed a sinful Samaritan woman at this time in history. "From the perspective of most devout Jewish males at the time, this woman had four distinguishing marks against her: her race, her religion, her gender, and her sin. These four things set her apart from the possibility of any kind of social relationship."<sup>6</sup>

Who are the "unclean" people we would rather not talk to? Imagine the worst "sinner" you can imagine. Would you be willing to talk to a lesbian working for Planned Parenthood? A drug addict? A tattoo-covered, dangerous-looking, foul-mouthed man? Imagine this: Jesus would talk to them. We should also ask ourselves, If we don't tell them about Jesus, who will?

Some of us use excuses not to talk to certain people. We tell ourselves that by talking to certain people, we will be drawn into sin. No one can make you sin but yourself. If you have a certain weakness, you may not want to be in a situation in which you will be tempted beyond what you can handle. In certain cases, the best thing to do is flee temptation. But we must not use this as an excuse. Consider once again the example of Jesus.

Of course, Jesus was not sinning by talking to this woman. He may have been transgressing the rules of the Pharisees, who added to God's law many other rules of their own. Similarly, many evangelical Christians like to add rules to the Bible. To put it bluntly: this is wrong and it must stop, for it interferes with evangelism. Some Christians assume certain things are sins even though the Bible doesn't call them sins. These same Christians often commit sins of omission by ignoring commands to love their neighbors (even their enemies) and share the gospel. In doing these things, they are like Pharisees, to whom Jesus said, "You leave the commandments of God and hold to the tradition of men" (Mark 7:8). Let us never think that we know better than God what is sin and what isn't.

Jerram Barrs writes, "God forbids us to add to his laws, yet doing so is one of the most obvious characteristics of much of our evangelical culture. Many of these rules are created for the specific purpose of preventing us, and especially our children, from being together with those outside the church."<sup>7</sup> These added rules keep us away from the very people that need the gospel. They also send the wrong message about Christianity. Instead of communicating that Christianity is a religion based on God's grace, when we adhere to a rigid system of manmade rules, we communicate that Christianity is a religion based on works and merit, just like every other religious system.

The second lesson we can learn from Jesus is the way he treats this woman with respect and dignity. We should treat all people with respect and dignity, for God created them in his image (even though sin has stained that image). By asking her for a drink of water, he

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<sup>6</sup> Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus*, 110.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 47.

acknowledges that he needs help and that she is able to help him. We, too, would do well to make ourselves vulnerable to unbelievers by acknowledging the good things that they offer. Asking someone for help is a way of opening lines of communication.

The third lesson is that Jesus offers the woman a positive message. Though she is a sinner, he does not condemn her. Think about that for a moment. Jesus is the only one who can pull off a “holier than thou” attitude, because he is sinless. Every other person is a sinner, equally deserving of condemnation. But Jesus does not condemn this woman. Instead, he talks to her about living water. It is an attractive message, and the way he presents it provokes her to ask a question. When he continues to talk about the superiority of his living water, she tells him to give her this water. I doubt this woman knew exactly what Jesus was talking about, but she knew Jesus was offering something desirable and something better than what the world can offer.

Sadly, Christians are often known by what they oppose, not what they offer. The world knows we are against certain sins. Yet the world doesn’t know that we offer a message of hope and love, of forgiveness and grace. We have to tell the world about the positive aspects of the gospel, not just the negative aspects, like sin and judgment. Jesus revealed this woman’s sin, but he did it in a non-threatening way. He saw that she was thirsting for the living water, he revealed her need (her sin), and then he offered himself.

As we engage people by getting to know them and by asking them questions, we should be able to determine whether they are interested in hearing about Jesus. If they show some interest, we can then point out the universal need for salvation and tell them about the Savior.

### **THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY (JOHN 7:53-8:11)**

Another episode from John’s gospel reveals how Jesus treated sinners. Actually, these verses do not appear in the earliest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, as well as the earliest manuscripts translated into other languages, like Syriac, Coptic, and Old Latin. The early church Fathers do not comment on this passage. When this passage appears in later manuscripts, it is often marked off by asterisks. Some manuscripts place this passage after John 7:36, John 7:44, John 21:25, and even Luke 21:28. Apparently, these verses are not part of the original gospel of John.

Yet this account of the woman caught in adultery has a ring of truth to it. After acknowledging that this passage is certainly not part of the original Bible, D. A. Carson writes, “On the other hand, there is little reason for doubting that the event here described occurred, even if in its written form it did not in the beginning belong to the canonical books.”<sup>8</sup> He then adds, “The reason for its insertion here may have been to illustrate 7:24 and 8:15 [both concern judgment] or, conceivably, the Jews’ sinfulness over against Jesus’ sinlessness (8:21, 24, 46).”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 333.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 334.

Though the passage appears not to be part of the inspired word of God, it may very well be a true account of what Jesus did and said, passed on orally until it was written down and inserted in later manuscripts. We cannot be sure. However, we can read it and learn from it as long as we are careful not to build an entire theology on it. (The same is true of the ending of Mark's gospel.)

<sup>53</sup> They went each to his own house, <sup>1</sup> but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. <sup>2</sup> Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. <sup>3</sup> The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst <sup>4</sup> they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. <sup>5</sup> Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" <sup>6</sup> This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. <sup>7</sup> And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." <sup>8</sup> And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. <sup>9</sup> But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. <sup>10</sup> Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" <sup>11</sup> She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." (John 7:53-8:11)

This passage is in some ways similar to the previous one, in that Jesus encounters a sinful woman. However, here we see the great contrast between Jesus and the scribes and the Pharisees. These men have caught this woman in adultery. How they caught her, we do not know. Carson also observes, "Adultery is not a sin one commits in splendid isolation: one wonders why the man was not brought with her. Either he was fleet of foot than she, and escaped, leaving her to face hostile accusers on her own; or the accusers themselves were sufficiently chauvinistic to focus exclusively on the woman."<sup>10</sup> The man was just as guilty as the woman was, but these Jewish leaders are not concerned about justice. Rather, they come to test Jesus, who is teaching at the temple.

Jesus does not answer them immediately. Instead, he bends down to the ground, writing something on it with his finger. It is impossible to know what he wrote. One early interpretation had Jesus writing Jeremiah 17:13: "O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water."<sup>11</sup> Jerram Barrs thinks Jesus may have written the Ten Commandments. "The passage that most obviously comes to mind is the account of the tablets of the law being inscribed by the finger of God [Deut. 10:1-5]."<sup>12</sup> Even if his guess is not correct, somehow his action and his words—"Let him who is without sin among you be the first

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>12</sup> Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus*, 27.



to throw a stone at her”—convicted these self-righteous men, who left without a word. “We must realize that—whatever it is that Jesus is writing—the effect is to cause each man present to remember his own most serious sins, the most morally embarrassing moments of his life. It is as if each one of them is standing half-naked and exposed (just like this poor woman) before the judgment seat of God and crowds of onlookers.”<sup>13</sup>

Once the men leave, Jesus tells the woman that he does not condemn her. But he also tells her to “go, and from now on sin no more.”

### **Learning from Jesus**

We can learn from both the negative example of the scribes and Pharisees and the positive example of Jesus.

The Jewish leaders came to test Jesus, probably because they knew he interacted with sinners. He ate and drank with sinners (Matt. 11:19), which caused the religious men of the day great consternation. They probably assumed that Jesus was soft on sin. By bringing this woman to Jesus, they would force him to either condemn the woman or prove that he wasn’t righteous.

The actions of these men show how self-righteous they are. They believe that they are morally superior to this woman. In a certain sense, they are, assuming they haven’t done anything as destructive as committing adultery. In God’s view, however, they are just as sinful. We would do well to remember the words of James:

<sup>8</sup> If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. <sup>9</sup> But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. <sup>10</sup> For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. <sup>11</sup> For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. <sup>12</sup> So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. <sup>13</sup> For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. (James 2:8-13)

Jesus, of course, corrects these men by showing them their sin. “Jesus shows them that they also deserve judgment. If they can show no mercy to her, no mercy will be shown to them. Whoever sees their own sin can no longer accuse and condemn other people, however serious their sin may be.”<sup>14</sup> We are not supposed to be like these accusing men, approaching unbelievers with condemning words. If we begin with an emphasis on sin, we are neither starting with the beginning of the gospel message (God), nor are we communicating the attractive and hopeful parts of it (forgiveness and eternal life). People who do not believe in God do not believe in sin, and we shouldn’t expect them to.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 28.

According to the great Welsh preacher D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “To expect Christian conduct from a person who is not born again is heresy.”<sup>15</sup> He was surely overstating the point, but he meant that we shouldn’t expect unbelievers to behave as though they were Christians. We can’t say to an unbeliever, “Surely you remember what Jesus said about lust . . .” and expect to be understood. We do have to talk about sin, of course, but it shouldn’t be the first thing that we mention. It would be better to mention God’s grace and love first.

Jesus does not call us to judge the world. Rather, he calls us to be his witnesses in the world. This means that we will have to witness to sinful people. Some of them will be committing big sins, like these two women we have seen. When we judge unbelievers, we forget what Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

<sup>9</sup> I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—<sup>10</sup> not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.  
<sup>11</sup> But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. <sup>12</sup> For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?  
<sup>13</sup> God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.” (1 Cor. 5:9-13)

Jesus reserved his toughest comments for the “insiders,” those who knew the Old Testament law and acted contrary to the spirit of that law. We must not act like Pharisees. Rather, we must balance telling the world the truth about God, sin, and Jesus, with being gracious and loving. When we consider our own sin and our own need for God’s grace, we are less likely to condemn others. We need to be like Jesus, neither condemning the sinner nor condoning the sin. Instead, in love and compassion, we need to point people to Jesus.

This passage is a wonderful one to read to people who do not yet know Jesus. Imagine asking this simple question: “Can I read to you a short passage from the Bible that shows who Jesus is?” Then you can read these twelve verses, explain what is going on (who the scribes and Pharisees are, what the Old Testament said about adultery, etc.), and then highlight how, for the believer, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). You can also show how believers in Christ are supposed to “go, and from now on sin no more.”

### **THE FORGIVEN WOMAN AND THE PHARISEE (LUKE 7:36-50)**

Yet another episode in the gospels illustrates the differences between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus is the loving and forgiving friend of sinners, whereas the Pharisees are self-righteous men who try to justify themselves through their outward obedience to the law.

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<sup>15</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 17.

<sup>36</sup> One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. <sup>37</sup> And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, <sup>38</sup> and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. <sup>39</sup> Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." <sup>40</sup> And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

<sup>41</sup> "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" <sup>43</sup> Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." <sup>44</sup> Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup> Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." <sup>48</sup> And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." <sup>49</sup> Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" <sup>50</sup> And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:36-50)

The scene of this passage is the home of Simon, a Pharisee. Simon has asked Jesus to come to his house and eat. As they are eating, a woman comes to Jesus with a flask of ointment. She cleans Jesus' feet in a most unusual way, by wetting his feet with her tears, wiping his feet with her hair, and then kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. As the whole passage reveals, she is a "sinner" who has been forgiven by Jesus. Her act of service flows out of love and gratitude.

In stark contrast to this woman is Simon. He knows this woman is a sinner, perhaps because her sin is similar to the Samaritan woman's. "From the way Simon thinks about her we should probably assume that she is either a prostitute or a woman who has been sexually promiscuous in such an open way that the whole community knows about her immoral life."<sup>16</sup> Simon assumes that Jesus cannot truly be a prophet because he seems not to be bothered by the sinful woman. Simon wrongly assumed that a man of God could not have fellowship with sinners.

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<sup>16</sup> Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus*, 133.

Jesus was aware of his reputation among the scribes and Pharisees. He ate and drank with unrighteous people; therefore, the Jewish leaders called him “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Luke 7:34). Jesus knows what Simon is thinking, so he tells him a short parable. A moneylender has two debtors. One of them owed five hundred denarii, about one and a half year’s wages. The other owed fifty denarii, about two months’ wages.<sup>17</sup> The moneylender forgives both the debtors. Who will love him more? (Or, to put it another way, who will be more grateful?) The answer is easy: the one who has been forgiven more.

Then Jesus tells Simon that that he, the host, did not wash Jesus’ feet, but the woman did. Gracious hosts usually had their servants wash the feet of the guest. Apparently Simon did not think Jesus was worthy of this honor, but the woman did. Simon did not greet Jesus with a holy kiss, but the woman kissed Jesus’ feet. Simon did not anoint Jesus’ head with oil, but the woman anointed Jesus’ feet with ointment. The point is clear: Jesus forgives this woman, and out of her love and gratitude, she is honoring him. She worships him. Simon, however, does not.

### **Learning from Jesus**

Though we are not God and do not have the ability to forgive sins, we can be like Jesus in not holding the pasts of unbelievers against them. This woman has obviously committed many sins. Jesus says so. However, he treats her with love and respect. He doesn’t use the woman’s past failures as a club with which to beat her. “We are being shown by Jesus’ example and teaching that true righteousness, truly knowing God and being a follower of Christ, does not mean despising sinners or separating ourselves from them—although it is very widely taught among evangelical Christians today that this is precisely what Christian faith means.”<sup>18</sup>

We can learn from the woman, too. Her actions paint a very beautiful picture of a forgiven person worshiping her Savior in love and gratitude. Christians should be joyful and should praise Jesus for making salvation possible. We should show our appreciation of him by giving him our best, just as this woman does.

### **Don’t be a Pharisee**

Unfortunately, we can learn a lot from the negative example of Simon. When he looks upon this sinful woman, all he can see is her sin. Apparently, he does not think of himself as a sinner in need of God’s grace. Of course, it is clear from this passage that he does not believe that Jesus is God. Not yet, anyway.

Self-righteous people, like Simon or the other Pharisees we meet in the gospels, do not realize the depth of their sin or the height of God’s holiness. If they realized how holy God is, they would never think for a moment that they could justify themselves through their good works. Simon should have been familiar with Isaiah 64:6:

We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.

<sup>17</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 237.

<sup>18</sup> Barrs, *Learning Evangelism from Jesus*, 141.

We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

Unfortunately, even Christians can forget that they are justified by God's grace, not because of their works. Christians have sometimes looked down on others and paraded their righteous deeds. Sadly, some Christians even think of this as witnessing.

I have heard Christians boast of such self-righteous "evangelism." I remember one man saying that when he and his family were at the movies, he told the man behind him to stop swearing. In a separate conversation, I heard his wife say that the other people at her workplace know she is a Christian because she doesn't swear. Both the husband and wife thought that they were witnessing by showing others their good morals.

I have frequently quoted Jerram Barrs, the author of *Learning Evangelism from Jesus*. In this book, he gives two real examples of Christians who gave such witness. These examples are worth quoting at length.

One person told me that one day at work, she had criticized her fellow employee for the soft porn novels sitting on her desk. She had told the other woman that they were offensive to her as a Christian. I asked what the effect of this was. She replied that the woman had told everyone else in the office about it during the coffee break; and then, the next day, the woman asked her to remove her Bible from her desk, because she found it offensive.

An even sadder example came from a young man who started working at a garage. On the first day he was deeply upset by the 'girly' posters prominently displayed in the work area. He denounced the posters to the other men, telling them how offended he was, and he gave them a stern lecture about sexual purity and God's condemnation of lustful thoughts. The next day the men had obtained some far worse posters of pornographic images and tacked them to the walls. The young man immediately resigned his position. He told me this story because he was proud of his actions. He had been a good witness to Christ, and then he had been persecuted for righteousness' sake.<sup>19</sup>

Some of us may think that those two people were being good witnesses. But let us stop and think. What message did these people communicate through their actions? Did they indicate something of God's love and grace? Or did they just let their colleagues know that they were morally superior? How were their actions different from a Mormon's or a Muslim's?

Jesus, who was without sin, had the right to look down on sinners, and he did not. The only ones he condemned were the self-righteous. When he interacted with "sinners" such as tax collectors, prostitutes, and adulteresses, he offered himself as an alternative to their sin. He didn't overlook or condone their sin, but he also didn't condemn them. He spoke to them with compassion, grace, and love.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 113.

Since we are sinners saved only by God's grace, we should also be compassionate and loving towards people still enslaved by sin. We should realize that, but for the grace of God, we would be like them. We don't ever want to excuse or condone sin, but we do want to have the opportunity to share the gospel in a loving way. If we act as though we are morally superior to them—as if we had saved ourselves through our upright behavior—then we are communicating the wrong message and we won't have the opportunity to make friends with whom we can share the gospel. As in the two examples above, we may actually create a wall between unbelievers and us.

If we have the chance to communicate one thing about the gospel to unbelievers, it should be this: we Christians are sinners who have been saved by God's grace through faith, not through our righteous works. If we point how we much we need Jesus and tell them about how God has changed us, we will be more likely to have a positive conversation about the gospel. If we arrogantly and gracelessly show off our superior Christian ethics, we are not communicating the gospel to anyone. In fact, we may need to reconsider the gospel message ourselves.

### **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

How have you interacted with unbelievers? Have you ever been like the Pharisees?  
Have you ever acted like Jesus?

Have you ever added rules to the Bible's teachings? Does this help or hamper evangelism?

How can you point to Jesus and God's grace when talking to unbelievers? Can you do this without condoning their sinful behaviors?

When you see people in sin, how can you point them to the Savior instead of your superior morality?

Who are the Samaritans in your life? That is, who are the people that seem "unclean" to you?

How can you cross barriers like Jesus to reach unbelievers?

Stop and think about the ways you have come across to non-Christians. If you have been self-righteous, take a moment to confess this to God. Repent of having such a proud attitude and think of how you can avoid acting that way in the future.