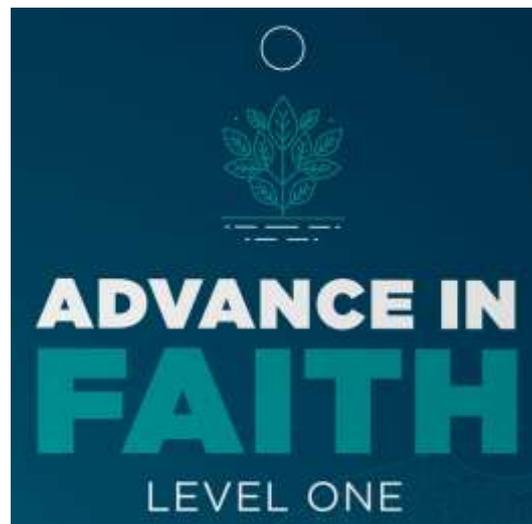


Good news for God's world

Advance in Faith Unit 108

Week 5 — Jesus' conversations



Introduction

What can we learn from the way Jesus related to people? Tonight we're going to listen in on some of Jesus' one-on-one conversations, as he chatted with:

- an influential leader named Nicodemus (John 3)
- a despised woman from Sychar in Samara (John 4)

John's gospel draws us into these conversations. Take the position of a disciple learning from the Master as we listen to how Jesus spoke with people. You will discover that Jesus had no pre-planned agenda: the person he was speaking to was the agenda. Each conversation was as unique as the person he shared with. He genuinely loved them for who they were.

These conversations are very familiar, but we tend to hear them in our own cultural setting and through our theological framework. There's a world of difference between our setting and the honour/shame culture of first century Palestine. We need to consciously put aside both our theological presuppositions and Western culture to appreciate these conversations.

Nicodemus (John 3:1-6)

Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jewish people—the Honourable Nicodemus, if you like. He was committed to the Jewish faith, specifically a sect that encouraged everyone to follow the Mosaic Law in every detail of their lives. Jesus' relationship with these Pharisees was often confrontational, but Nicodemus pays Jesus great respect. He acknowledges Jesus as a rabbi (teacher) from God, operating with heavenly authority, because the miracles are evidence (signs) that God's power is with him (Jn 3:2). Very few of the Jewish leaders approach Jesus as well as this man does.

In contrast, Jesus' reply is jarring and confrontational. John may have omitted some small talk, but we get the impression that Jesus pushes back against Nicodemus straight away: unless one is born again, there is no chance of seeing God's reign (3:3).

Christians tend to read this as if Jesus said, "You must become a born-again Christian if you want to go to heaven." That's not what Jesus said, and it's not what Nicodemus heard. Like all good Pharisees, Nicodemus was very familiar with the phrase "kingdom of God" because that's what Israel had been in Old Testament times. They had lost the kingdom to Babylon, and Rome now ruled them, but they were earnestly looking forward to the day when God would restore his reign by putting a Davidic king back on the throne.

Nicodemus has never heard of "born again." That's not part of anyone's religious vocabulary, and he doesn't know what it means. He certainly does not think, "Oh, Jesus wants me to be a born-again Christian."

Think from Nicodemus' perspective. The dialogue in John 3:2-3 would have felt something like this in his honour/shame culture:

Nic.: Rabbi, despite what others think, there are some of us Pharisees who recognise that you are a teacher with divine authority behind you. The miraculous signs you're doing make it clear that God is working through you.

Jesus: You want the truth? I'll tell you! You're pleased you were born as one of God's chosen people. You think you're wellborn—belonging to a powerful and influential family. And you're wondering if you may have been lucky enough to be born at the very time when God will restore the kingdom to Israel. You've got it all wrong. From where you are standing, you have no chance of seeing God restoring his kingdom. You'll have to start life all over again.

As a leader, Nicodemus is quite accustomed to thinking on his feet, so he recovers from the insult and pushes back gently against what Jesus has said (Jn 3:4-6):

Nic.: Now come on, Jesus. You and I both know that's unrealistic. Life is what it is, and no one has the luxury of going back inside their mother's womb to start life over again.

Jesus: Get real! Lifeless people like you cannot enter God's reign. Being born as a fleshly human makes you a fleshly human; being rebirthed by God's Spirit makes you spiritually alive.

Why did Jesus give this message to this particular man? He never told anyone else this. It was certainly not his paradigm for evangelism.

The crucial thing to grasp is that "You must be born again" was, in Jesus' culture, an insult. It was roughly equivalent to, "You're hopeless. You're not well-born. You know nothing. You have no life in you. You have to start all over again."

What Jesus was doing was cutting straight through the palaver, the niceties that upper-class people use to pat each other on the back and avoid the stark realities of how bad the broken world is. Those who rule have a vested interest in painting the world as "just fine." Jesus cuts through the pleasantries to address the extent of evil, for only then will rulers let go of their own pride. Nicodemus and rulers like him cannot fix the world by making a few adjustments: it is more radically damaged. Everything and everyone must be completely

reoriented—reborn—before God's intended purposes and reign are released. It is the well-born who find this truth most confronting.

So, when should we be as direct and confronting with people as Jesus was with Nicodemus? I suggest the time to do that is when you get pleasantries from a ruler who papers over the radical grip of evil on the world. Just be careful that you are not acting out of malice or grievance, since that would compromise our message: evil does not overcome evil. Our enemy is not the human rulers, but the powers that enslave them (Eph 6:12). Even to the rulers, we hold out the hope of rebirth, for God's Son—the Prince of Heaven—did not come to his rebellious world to condemn it but to rescue it (John 3:16-17).

Samaritan woman (John 4:1-26)

For Jesus' next conversation, John moves us to the other end of the social spectrum. In the first century Jewish world, women had a lower social status than men. Jesus accepted women in ways that were radical, perhaps even scandalous. Jesus was the first rabbi to ever have women disciples travelling with him (Luke 8:1-3).

This conversation is not just with a woman, but with a Samaritan woman. This was unheard of: "Jews do not associate with Samaritans" (John 4:9). In Old Testament times, the kingdom of Israel split into two. Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom, and they set up golden calves to worship instead of coming to the temple in Jerusalem. God was so displeased with them that the Assyrians took their land and imported foreigners to occupy it (2 Kings 17:24-33). To the Jews, these Samaritans were therefore mongrels, half-Gentiles, with no valid claim on God's promises to Abraham's descendants.

When Galilean Jews attended the annual festivals in Jerusalem, they avoided Samaria, preferring the longer route down the Jordan Valley. That's why it's odd that John said Jesus *had to* pass through Samaria (4:4). There was no geographical reason why Jesus had to take that route, so John is saying that Jesus made a conscious choice to include the Samaritans in his itinerary (compare Luke 4:42).

If it's not bad enough that Jesus is chatting with a woman, and that this woman is a Samaritan, as the story unfolds we learn that this particular woman has a bad reputation. She is the bad Samaritan, the one everyone treated like a leper because she made you unclean. A Jewish man chatting to a bad Samaritan woman was unthinkable, really suspect! If you think I'm over-dramatizing, just look how shocked Jesus' disciples were: "What are you after? Why are you talking to her?" (4:27).

That's the background. Now let's listen to the conversation unfolds.

Jesus opens the conversation by asking for a drink (4:7). He does not do this because he has a sermon on the water of life all prepared, but because he's hot and tired and thirsty (4:6) and has no bucket (4:11).

Now think from the woman's point of view. Women normally drew water in the cool of the day, but she has come at noon (4:6). Given her reputation as a husband-stealer (4:18), can you imagine why she might come alone, hoping not to run into anyone? A Jewish man will be certain to ignore her, so she approaches the well. She's shocked when he speaks to her. How can you talk to me? How could you even imagine sully yourself by drinking from the same container?

Adrenaline is pumping through her body. She's not sure if she should run, or play along and see where this goes. She doesn't run. His voice was not threatening. In the simple act of asking for a drink, he had treated her as someone of value, as if she had something to offer. She challenges him to see what kind of man he really is: "How can you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (4:9)

He doesn't take the bait. Instead, he treats her as an equal—offering to give her a drink of something to satisfy her deepest thirst. It's probably been a long time since anyone considered her needs. Is this guy for real, or is this some kind of pickup line? She's suspicious. Curiosity convinces her to play along with him. She challenges him again: "You don't have a bucket. It's a deep well. How do you think you can give a drink that will satisfy me? Who do you think you are? They say that Jacob himself gave us this well. It's been sustaining us and our animals for thousands of years. You wander up and try to offer me something better? Do you think you're better than Jacob?" (4:11-12)

Once again, Jesus doesn't take the bait. He responds not just to her words but to her heart. She still hasn't drawn him a drink, yet he is genuinely interested in her needs. "This ancient well doesn't satisfy you long-term. It's not long before you feel thirsty again. I'm talking about the kind of water that permanently satisfies you, like a living spring, like God's unending life." (4:13-14).

There's a kindness in his words, a kind of genuine caring that melts her suspicions. She no longer challenges him. She lets down her guard and lets him see the emptiness she feels. Life is drudgery. She treks out to this well every day, hoping to avoid the people who hate her. She's alone, deeply unsatisfied, like a hollow shell repeating these meaningless motions each day.

She looks away from the stranger, down at the dust. She's still not sure this stranger can deliver what he promises, but neither can she hide the emptiness within. Her dry voice reveals the thirst within:

“Sir, I'd like to drink like that. I don't want to keep coming here every empty day” (4:15).

Jesus recognises just how vulnerable she is at this point. He asks her to go and call her husband. She finds this sudden change jarring. Perhaps this whole conversation really was a pickup line? She knows how to play that game: “Oh, I don't have husband” (4:17).

“Well, I guess that's true. You've had five husbands, and the bloke you're living with now is actually someone else's husband, so you could say that” (4:18).

Silence. Awkward embarrassing silence. She's thinking, “That's my worst secret! How could he possibly know that? ... unless he is a prophet. But a holy man certainly wouldn't be talking to me. This makes no sense. It's too close to the bone. I'm too vulnerable. I need to push him away a bit, to gain some emotional distance. How can I do that? I know: I'll distract him with the fact that we shouldn't be having this conversation anyway because he's a Jew and I'm a Samaritan.” She doesn't say all that, but that's probably why she digs up the old argument between Jews and Samaritans about where people should worship (4:19-20).

Let's put the story on hold for a minute. You often find people doing this. Before they share something difficult and vulnerable, they may test the waters by asking a smaller safer question. Depending on how you listen and care about them and their feelings, they will then decide whether to trust you with their deeper feelings.

As things progress, you also find that there are moments when people feel too exposed and they retreat behind some other issue that seems safer. Learn from Jesus how to respond. He simply takes what the Samaritan woman gave him, treating her and her question with genuine respect. He knew it was a smokescreen, and he cared that she needed a smokescreen.

The Samaritan woman ducks for cover behind a mountain. The Torah told Israel that God would choose a place where they should worship (Deuteronomy 12:1, 11, 14, 18, 21; 14:23-25; 15:20; 16:2-16; 17:10; 18:6; 31:11). Once Solomon had built the temple on Mount Zion (Jerusalem), it was obvious to the Jewish people that this was the mountain God meant. But Jerusalem is not directly mentioned in Torah, whereas Mount Gerizim is specifically mentioned as the mountain of blessing (Deut 11:29; 27:12). The Samaritan Pentateuch therefore expands these passages in Deuteronomy to make it clear that Mount Gerizim, not Mount Zion, was the place God chose. In fact, in the Samaritan version of the Ten Commandments, the tenth command

is to build an altar on Mount Gerizim.¹ They had actually built a temple there, but Jewish rulers had destroyed it three generations ago (128 BC).²

Notice what Jesus does when the Samaritan woman hides behind this religious chestnut. He does not dismiss her question so as to focus her back on the “important” things: he understands the distance she wants to create. He demonstrates his respect for her by taking her question seriously, without being diverted into theological argument. He finds common ground, explaining that the location of the mountain isn't as important as Jews and Samaritans have thought, for God desires true worshippers—people who will worship him in spirit and in reality (4:21-24).

To the Samaritan woman, this is so strange. He knows her failures, and yet he treats her as if she could possibly be a true worshipper?

She recalls that people talked about a time in the distant future when God would send an anointed ruler to restore shattered Israel. Perhaps then Jews and Samaritans could live and worship together. But it had been over 700 years since Samaria fell so it seemed like an impossible dream.

Nevertheless, this Jewish prophet had come to Samaria, and he talked about including them as genuine worshippers? ... Surely not! ... This man who knew her deepest secrets and fears and emptiness and still offered to restore her broken life and unify her with God's people—surely this could not be the one they had always hoped for? ... She plucks up the courage to ask: “I know the anointed ruler will come, and when he does he will sort out all these things for us” (4:25).

Jesus sees the hope rising within her. He can contain himself no longer: “Yes, you're talking to him” (4:26). Jesus has shared more with her than he has with the religious leaders in Jerusalem!

What happens next is staggering. Remember, she came out at midday hoping not to see a soul, avoiding the way the women whisper about her. They don't want her anywhere near their husbands! At this time of day she can usually find her way home without anyone speaking to her or confronting her shame.

But today is different! Today she runs down the street calling at the top of her voice, “*Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did!*” Everything she ever did? Wasn't that what she was hiding from? Wasn't that her shame? Her shame no longer dominates her! She no longer cares who knows!

¹ P. J. Williams, “Textual Criticism” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (IVP, 2003), 836.

² Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 11.324.

Why? What's changed? Jesus *accepted* her. He knew all her failings, and yet he accepted her. That's radical. That's life-changing!

The "good news" is that God has found a way, in Christ, to accept us. Jesus not only told her good news; he *was* good news to her. The gospel is not just something we say; it's something we do—enacting the good news of acceptance. That's how prisoners are set free. It's how blind people see. It's how oppressed people are liberated. It's what it means to give good news to impoverished people (Luke 4:18).

When the other Samaritans from her village see how liberated she is, they're curious. She has never before understood that others—even the judgemental women who needed to put her in her place—were actually as desperate for acceptance as she was (4:39-42).

Conclusion

You could hardly get two more contrasting conversations. Jesus confronted a ruler who struggled to let go of his privileged position—the very thing that was preventing him from even seeing where God was at work turning the world upside down so the powerless are honoured and the Son that God ordained to rule the earth releases it from condemnation into his reign. Jesus engaged this man at a more substantial level than Nicodemus was comfortable with. It was confronting: the powerful must let go of their privilege—to be born again—if they are to see God's reign.

Then John describes the other extreme: a woman, a Samaritan woman, a Samaritan woman rejected even in her village. Despite the taboos, Jesus engages her. He understands how she feels, struggling to survive in the shadow of her shame. As he listens to the crushed woman, he is also listening to God. At just the right moment, he brings the cause of her rejection to the surface. He allows her to duck for cover behind a mountain, but even there he accepts her. She has never been treated like that. She recognises divine caring when she feels it. It transforms her life, and the lives of everyone she knows.

Lord Jesus, teach me to love as you loved, to engage with people as you did, to disturb the comfortable, and comfort the disturbed.

Group Questions

1. Which of these people did you personally relate to?
Nicodemus, or the nameless Samaritan woman?
2. As you listened in on Jesus' conversations with these two people, what did you learn from the way Jesus confronted and accepted people? What can you learn about the way you converse with people?
3. This unit has not given you a pre-packaged way to present the gospel to people. Should it have?

Memory Work

John 4:42 (NIV)

They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that **this man really is the Saviour of the world.**"

Take Home Exercise

Think about significant spiritual conversations you've had recently. Which is more natural for you: the approach Jesus used with Nicodemus (combative), or the approach he used with the Samaritan woman (sensitive and accepting)? Can you think of people with whom you would use the other approach?

Are there other people in your world who might be interested in talking about God, the injustice and struggles we all experience in this world, and how those things will ultimately be resolved?

Spend some time praying for the people you're talking with. What are their needs? How do they view themselves and their place in society? What do they already understand (or misunderstand) about God? What is God doing in their lives? What could you do to give them a better understanding of the God who is saving his world?

If it helps, jot down your thoughts and prayers in a journal. Include your expressions of gratitude for the people you know and the joy of partnering with God in what he is doing.