

## Seeing (and Seizing) the Opportunity

I remember my first feeble attempt at evangelism. I don't remember exactly how old I was, but probably 9 or 10 years old—the middle of my elementary school years. We lived out in the country so I rode the bus every day. I was the first one on and the last off.

The second kid on the bus was named Mark. We sat in the back of the bus and I was always jealous of him because every morning he brought chocolate Pop Tarts and my parents never bought us Pop Tarts. Well, one thing I wasn't jealous about was the fact that Mark was a sinner. He was lost. I knew it deep in my soul. How did I know? Because he swore! That was a sure giveaway that he was bound for the lake of fire.

Needless to say, I was concerned about his eternal destiny, so one afternoon when it was just he and I left on the bus, I decided I was going to get him saved. He had brought some legos with him that day and was kneeling on the floor using the seat as a table to play on. So, I got down on the floor with him and I asked him, *“Mark, what's the most important thing in your life?”*

Mark never even looked up at me, but kept playing and he said, *“I don't know. Legos.”* Then I said, *“Mark, the most important thing in my life is Jesus.”* And then the bus stopped at his house, Mark got off and we never talked about it again. I'm not sure if his eternal destiny changed that day, but at least I did my part.

Now, if you're thinking that was a pretty awkward attempt at evangelism, you would be absolutely right. But I suspect that there are a good number of you in this room today feel that way about evangelism *all the time*. If you're like many, you look at people and you think, "That person would never want to become Christian." Or you're nervous because you think if you ever shared your faith, they would ask questions you didn't know the answer to. And besides, you're still trying to figure this stuff out yourself.

Any way you look at it, evangelism is terrifying for many people. And I believe the reason it's awkward or terrifying for us is more about *us* than it is about *them*. Maybe you feel guilty because you know that Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations," and the church has told you that we should be sharing your faith. So, you *treat it as a duty to fulfill rather than a gift to offer that will change their life*.

Now it can also be awkward because many of us have been taught a formula for sharing Jesus like the Romans Road, or Four Spiritual Laws, or a tract to hand out that no matter how hard you try, you can't seem to steer the discussion to bring it up. The issue is that our society today is different than 30 years ago. You used to be able to count on people sharing a basic Christian worldview. If someone didn't go to church, they at least felt guilty because they thought they should. Today, it's not even on many people's radar.

In the past, people worried about sin and judgment. Today, people don't think as much about sin and most likely believe that God doesn't care much about how we live. In

the past, people worried about their eternal destiny. Today, it's rare to find people who give it much thought. So, overly spiritualized, theological formulas don't connect.

Now, that's not to say that people aren't interested in God in general or Jesus. People like Jesus. But they think about spirituality differently. I don't believe we can start with an abstract, strictly spiritual truth; people today are looking for *practical* truth.

Their pressing concerns are things like paying the bills, having a better marriage, or raising kids without going crazy. They worry about being accepted by others and living a fulfilling life. That's why these are the places evangelism begins, because it just so happens that God cares about these things, too.

In fact, God wants people to experience Shalom. We talked about this last week. Shalom is when all the relationships of our lives are right. Relationship with God, ourselves, others, and the world around us. He meets us all right where we are and wants to restore us to the masterpiece he created us to be to give us a taste of what eternity will be like. That's what Jesus has to offer. Who doesn't want that?

So, today I want to look at the story of Jesus and the woman at the well in John, chapter 4, because I believe Jesus' approach with this woman is a great model for evangelism in our world today. [read 1-29, 39-42] Let's talk about five things we can learn about evangelism from this story. In fact, we might even call them five steps. So, let's get right to it.

The first step is to *form relationships with people outside the church*. I know it seems strange to have to say it, but statistics show that the longer someone is a Christian, the fewer non-Christian friends they have. That's why we need to be intentional about cultivating friendships with people outside the church. Without these friendships, it's easy for Christians live in a bubble, lose touch with the world and start to caricature or demonize them. One great reason to cultivate friendships outside the church is that we're reminded that they have the same struggles, hurts and dreams we do and it becomes much harder for "us" to see "them" as our enemy.

Jesus was relentless about cultivating friendships with folks the religious people called "sinners" (as if they weren't sinners themselves). They labeled him "friend of sinners." (Luke 7:34) They considered it an insult, he considered it an honor because he was able to see past the mud of sin and shame to the masterpiece underneath.

But the other reason it's necessary for us to cultivate relationships with people outside the church is that if we want to be like Jesus we have to be people who *run toward mud*. Growing up, I picked up the attitude that if I wasn't appalled and offended by sin, I wasn't holy enough. I needed to avoid sinners or it would rub off on me. But Jesus did just the opposite. You see, the woman at the well had layers of mud. Look.

Verse 4 says that Jesus "*had to go through Samaria.*" There was a deep animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans. Centuries before, the nation of Israel was divided

into the northern tribes (Samaritan ancestors) and the southern tribes (the ancestors of the Jews). Kind of like the north and the south in the U.S. around civil war time. God commanded Israel to stay ethnically and religiously pure. But the Samaritans were neither and the southern Jews blamed them for the nation being carried off into exile.

Now, almost 500 years later, this was still a deep resentment. Samaria sat between Judea where Jesus *was*, and Galilee, where he was *going*. If at all possible, most devout Jews would rather *go around* Samaria than through it even though that route was harder and longer. It was worth it to avoid Samaritans. Jesus went straight through which put him into contact with a lone Samaritan woman who came to the well to get water.

Now, the first layer of mud was that she was a Samaritan. In verse 9 she's shocked when Jesus asks her for water. **"You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?"** and John adds this commentary, **"for Jews do not associate with Samaritans."** For all the Jews, this woman was "other," and "less than."

Layer two was that she was a *woman*. A devout Jewish man, especially a rabbi, would never talk to a woman in public. There was even a sect of religious leaders known as the "Bleeding Pharisees" because they were so committed to not looking at women, they always looked at the ground while they were walking and often ran into things.

Layer three was that the woman was a terrible “sinner.” Later in the conversation it comes out that she had been married 5 times and was now living with a man. That explains why she was drawing water from the well at noon by herself.

Typically, going out to get water was a social activity of the women in the town. They would go out early in the morning when it was still cool. It was more than just utility, it was social time. They’d catch up on the news of the day while they were getting water. But this woman was at the well in the heat of the day, by herself, most likely trying to avoid the other women, most likely she was the subject of the gossip.

While everyone else avoided the woman, Jesus went straight for her. He knew her culture, religion, lifestyle, sin, struggle—all of it, and yet he wasn’t shocked. He seized the opportunity to offer the grace and power of God to restore her.

Mud has a tendency to isolate us. Very seldom will someone share that they’re struggling financially. Couples tend to withdraw from people rather than share that they’re struggling in their marriage. Christians struggling with sin, or addiction, or depression—rather than reaching out, will pull away. For some reason these struggles create shame or embarrassment that cause us to isolate and as a result, they end up struggling alone. That’s why we have to be people who move *toward* mud. When we do, we bring the person who is struggling to the one who can heal and restore.

But when you move toward mud (whether it's sin or suffering of some kind), don't be quick to try to fix it. *Listen to their story.* The reason this is important is that often the issue on the outside isn't the real issue.

Most people would have looked at the Samaritan woman as a rebellious sinner with no conscience. But Jesus had a different perspective. Yes, she was a sinner, but she was also a victim. She was a victim of a society that allowed a husband to discard his wife and didn't leave her with many options. Sometimes what looks like rebellion on the outside, is actually an attempt to cope with past rejection, abuse, or abandonment.

People try to fill their need for intimacy in sexual relationships. They seek self-worth in money and power. People often do things they don't want to do because they feel it's the only way they'll be accepted. Some are angry and mean because they don't know how to process the hurt that lies deep inside, so it's their way to avoid looking weak.

If we only look at the outside, we get the wrong picture. Jesus refused to condemn sin because he knew that sin goes much deeper than what we see on the outside. When you listen carefully to people's story, you'll often see how the mud came to be.

You see, those stories shape our identity—how we see ourselves. And we always live according to our identity. So, the goal of evangelism isn't to make people behave better or just to convince them of abstract ideas, but it's to *help them identify with what*

*God intended them to be.* When you take the time to listen to their story, look for the masterpiece breaking through the mud.

Now, here's where we have to make a little switch in the story. It's great for us to learn about evangelism from Jesus, but we aren't Jesus. In the story, Jesus goes on to reveal that he's the Messiah she's been waiting for. I would recommend that you don't follow Jesus' example here. The truth is we're actually more like the woman than we are Jesus. We're masterpieces covered in mud, but are being transformed by our encounter with Jesus. So, what did the woman then? Points four and five.

*She shared her story and invited people into community.* Verse 28, **“Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?” They came out of the town and made their way toward him.”** The most powerful tool you have to share Jesus isn't the Four Spiritual Laws or the Romans Road, it's your own story. Most people don't live in the world of abstract theology. They live in the world of trying to get by a day at time. They live in a personal, social, and material world. People are interested in spiritual things, but only when it impacts their life here and now. So, what has Jesus done for *you*? If you can't articulate it, take the time and sit down and write it out.



Now, I know many of you have a sketchy history that you're reluctant to share because you're afraid you'll be glorifying sin or they'll lose respect for you as a Christian. Or maybe it's a pride thing and you don't want people to see that you were weak.

But there's the thing—you're not the hero of your story. Jesus is. And if Jesus has healed your hurts or freed you from sin, or helped you overcome terrible circumstances, that's a powerful testimony. Don't glorify sin or struggle, but don't feel the need to hide it, either, because people will identify with it. If you gloss over it they'll be tempted to say, "Well, you just don't know what it's like. You haven't been through what I've been through." So, get over your pride and share how Jesus helps you get your stuff together.

But some of you are probably thinking, I don't really have much of a testimony. I've never even been in jail. That's me. I've never been drunk. About the worst thing I did in high school was stay out too late. But Jesus is changing me.

I grew up very concerned about how I look, both physically and image-wise. It wasn't something that was explicitly taught to me, but I picked it up along the way. All of my relationships were based on my performance—my parents, my friends, my church, and even God. I always had to be good enough and I always had to be the one to fix things. I would never ask for help and I would certainly never let on that I wasn't as put together on the inside as I looked on the outside. This is what made becoming a pastor a great fit—I thought. I didn't realize it, but that mask I wore was really heavy.

In 2008, Cedar Rapids experienced a 500-year flood—it was similar to Houston this past month. Being the fixer I am and being a part of a church that's expected to help, I got right work on it, recruiting people in the church to lead the efforts, hosting recovery teams from outside the church and helping with cleanup myself. If you've ever been through a disaster that large-scale, you know that it's an incredibly emotional experience that tends to bring hidden things to the surface.

I remember, it was my birthday that year and I had made plans to go to a movie with my family right after work. I had been working long hours—recovery efforts never seem to stop, so I had seen very little of my family for a couple of weeks—I was saving the day, after all.

And I remember, just as I was breaking free from work to meet my family at the theater, I got a call from someone in the church who had another emergency pop up that just couldn't wait. And I remember sitting in my car in the parking lot of the theater, paralyzed about what to do. The church member was getting angry and I desperately missed my family—and it was my birthday.

I went to the movie, but when I got home that night after getting the kids to bed, I broke down in an emotional release. I realized that night that I had set everything up so that people *needed* me. My wife just held me as I sobbed. It was at that moment that the mask of looking good and being the fixer who can handle anything was starting to melt.

While I still have a ways to go on that journey, at that moment I began to realize how much of a toll the need to look put together had taken on me. But during that time, I also learned that God loves me, even when I'm not put together—even when I come across things I can't fix. My value isn't determined by my performance. But that we have a God that while we were still sinners, died to give us life.

You see, that's it. I don't have the same story you do, but I most certainly can identify with people who believe they have to be "good enough" to be accepted. If you're paying attention and if you're willing to admit it, you've had literally dozens of those moments in your life that can be a lifeline for someone who's struggling.

Finally, *invite them into community*. We live in an isolated society. In my small group we have Miriama, from Slovakia, and Balkisa from Sierra Leone. And during our conversation last Tuesday, both said one of the hardest adjustments they've had to make to this culture is that we are so isolated.

Last week we talked about the four areas of Shalom; spiritual, personal, social, and material (or financial). Well, Africa might be materially poor, but they're relationally rich. For instance, in Sierra Leone, when you're feeling lonely, you knock on your neighbor's door and you sit and chat the whole afternoon. Here, when we're feeling lonely, we turn on Netflix or the TV and distract ourselves. We're financially rich, but relationally poor and it's taking its toll on people.

Loneliness is a major cause of depression and alcoholism. It raises the risk of suicide in all ages. People who are lonely report higher levels of stress and lower quality of relationships when they ARE around people. It raises blood pressure and destroys the quality of sleep. And it's an epidemic in our society. Do you still wonder why Jesus created the church rather than just individual disciples?

Maybe the greatest need people have in our society today is to have a group of people who sees them and values them in their best times and their worst times. This is such a great need in our society today that one of the most important characteristics we can cultivate is to be a church where people can *belong* even before they *believe*.

That's why the church needs to be different. We have to learn to become relationally rich. Every church believes they're friendly, but we have to go beyond *friendliness* to *friendship*. It's one of the core values of our small groups. We have to drop the masks and be real with each other. You might not think of it as evangelism, but the most effective way for people to find Shalom is to be a part of a community who does it well. It gives people a chance to see it in action.

It's not the easy way and it takes a community that's serious and intentional about helping people find Jesus. But there will be few things in the world more life-giving than being a part of a community like that.