



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### The Signs of New Birth

St. John 4:28-30

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These last several weeks we've been looking at John 4 and the encounter Jesus had with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well in the town of Sychar. We've seen how Jesus shows us by example how to share the Good News with others. He stepped out of his comfort zone and crossed boundaries of religion, race, sex, and prejudice so that he could make a personal connection with a woman who needed to hear his message. We've seen how he's offered her living water—eternal life—as the solution to her problems. And last Sunday we saw how Jesus wasn't afraid to confront her sins. In fact, we saw that confronting sin is a critical part of sharing the Gospel. Jesus' whole mission was about saving us from our sins; if we aren't willing to admit our sins we'll never turn to Jesus as Saviour. We might turn to him as an example of what it looks like to be good and upstanding as a person, we might look to him as evidence of God's love, we might look to him as a source of blessing, but if we never admit our sins, we will never look to him as our Saviour.

Like most people, this woman got uncomfortable when her sins were confronted. She tried twice to deflect the conversation to some other subject. First she tried to change the conversation to the subject of Jesus being a prophet, then she brought up the religious controversy that had existed for centuries between the Jews and the Samaritans: Where was the right place to worship God? When that didn't work she tried the old line: "Well, okay, I guess nobody really has an answer to these questions. We'll just have to wait until the Messiah comes, then he'll straighten us all out and tell us who's right and who's wrong." How many times have we all heard that sort of

thing when we try to share biblical truth? But this was the perfect lead-in for Jesus. He responds in verse 26: "I who speak to you am he"—"I *am* the Messiah!"

That seems to have finally done it for this woman. She believed. That was when the disciples came back from the town. They'd gone off to buy lunch and came back surprised to see Jesus talking with this woman and while Jesus addressed them—reminding them that he was busy about the work of reaping the harvest in his Father's field—we're told in verses 28-30:

**So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" They went out of the town and were coming to him.**

If we're going to be faithful in evangelism—in sharing the Gospel with people—this part of the story raises an incredibly important question: How do we know when a man or a woman has truly received the Gospel and turned to Christ? At what point can we be confident that the Holy Spirit has taken our message and made it bear fruit in someone's life? Back in Chapter 3 Jesus told Nicodemus that new birth is known only by its effects. He said in 3:8, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." We can't see the wind, yet we know it's there because we can see what it does; just so we can't "see" the Holy Spirit in a person, but we *can* see that he is there because of the work of renewal and regeneration he does in a man or a woman's heart. The proof of the new birth is a changed heart and life.

Now, that doesn't mean that those who are born again are completely changed instantly. The Spirit often and usually does make a dramatic change in the lives he's just touched. I've known many people who were immediately convicted of sins they'd never before realised were in their lives—and they then set those sins aside. I've known many people who, when they were first born again, knew that they needed to go

as quickly as possible and right old wrongs and restore relationships they had damaged and broken. But Christian maturity takes time. We can't expect a mature Christian to be born overnight. On the flip side, Jesus reminds us here that if we see little or no evidence of the Spirit's transforming power at work in a person, we need to keep on sharing the Gospel with them, we need to keep on urging them to repentance, and we need to keep praying for them to be born again.

The Samaritan Woman's example shows us three primary places where the new birth should bring obvious change. *First*, it should lead to a confession of faith in Christ. *Second*, it should lead to a changed life. Finally, *third*, it should lead to a desire to share the Good News of the Cross with others.

So, first, when the Holy Spirit enters the heart one of the first things he does is bring about a confession of faith. When a baby is born the first thing the doctor wants to hear is his or her cry. That cry tells him that the baby is alive and breathing. So a new spiritual infant's cry of faith in Jesus is the first thing to tell us that or she is truly born again.

That said, it's not uncommon for people to get this reversed. They think that a confession of faith in Jesus is what brings about new birth. But Jesus is clear: confession of faith in him is the *result* of a person being born again of the Spirit. He said to Nicodemus in 3:3, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." This is why St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that the evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in someone's life is his or her confession that Jesus is Lord (12:3). New birth may come in private, but it will never stay that way. James Boice wrote, "Some persons think that they can be secret believers, but the Word of God never considers this a possibility. What does the Word of God say? 'Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven' (Mt. 10:32-33)."

This is what we see in this Samaritan woman. When she realised who Jesus

was and what it was she was being offered, she responded with a very public confession of faith. St. John tells us, “The woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?’” She was so excited about being born again that she couldn’t help but run back into town to tell the people what had happened and bring them back to receive the same new birth she’d received from Jesus.

Second, new birth will always result in a changed life. True faith produces good works. St. James tells us: “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:14-17). Scripture reminds us over and over that a healthy tree bears good fruit.

One of the most profound examples of all this is the life of John Newton. He was born in a Christian home, but his parents died when he was very young. He was sent to live with relatives who were unbelievers. Not only did his new family mock Christianity, they were abusive to Newton. When he was still young he ran away from home and became a sailor. As a sailor he fell into terrible sin himself. Eventually he joined up with a slave trader and before long was serving as navigator and mate on a slave ship.

At one point, off the coast of Scotland, Newton’s ship was nearly sunk in a bad storm. He was sent into the darkness of the hold to help the slaves work the pumps. He worked the pumps in the blackness for days and as he did so the Bible verses his mother had taught him so many years before began to come back to his mind. They reminded him of God’s grace and of the Cross where Jesus had paid the price of forgiveness for his sins. As the Spirit applied God’s

Word to his heart, Newton was born again and cried out in saving faith.

When Newton’s ship finally made land he left it and went looking for a church. He started a new life and grew in godliness, eventually becoming one of the best-known preachers of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. His experience of God’s grace also prompted him to write the hymn, “Amazing Grace”.

When it comes to the Samaritan woman, John tells us something important in this regard in verse 28: “The woman left her water jar and went away into town.” It doesn’t look like much at first, but realise that John uses the imagery of water throughout his Gospel.

Jesus’ first miracle was at the wedding feast in Cana when he turned water into wine. The water was stored in large jars. In fact, John uses the same Greek work to describe the jar this woman left at the well. Again, in Chapter 5, John tells us about the lame man who waited year after year at the pool of Bethesda hoping to be healed by the waters. In all these cases, John uses this sitting or stored up water—like the water in Jacob’s Well—to illustrate powerless and outward religion. In each case Jesus replaces that lifeless water with his living water and brings true spiritual power and new birth. John makes a point of this woman’s leaving her water jar, because her leaving it is symbolic of her leaving behind the outward ceremonial law that was practiced by both the Jews and the Samaritans. She set her old dead faith aside in favour of true and living faith in Jesus Christ. She had brought that jar to Jacob’s Well to draw its stagnant water, but Jesus gave her living water instead: “If you knew the gift of God...you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water...The water that I will give...will become...a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:10-14).

Bp. Ryle also points to the jar as being symbolic of the emptiness of her life. He wrote, “Grace once introduced into the heart drives out old tastes and interests. A converted person no longer

cares for what he once cared for. A new tenant is in the house: a new pilot is at the helm. The whole world looks different.” God’s grace takes over—the *amazing grace* that John Newton experienced and that changed everything—it makes us set aside old loves and affections and gives us a new zeal to declare God’s glory.

The problem is that even though people are attracted to Jesus’ living water, they aren’t ready to leave behind the jar of well water. They know that Jesus’ new birth will lead them to a better life, but there are things in their old lives they aren’t willing to let go.

About two-hundred years ago a pastor named Ichabod Spencer wrote about his experiences in sharing Jesus with people. He writes in one instance about a man who, just like the Samaritan woman, needed to give up a container. The man was a farmer. He’d attended church faithfully for many years. His wife was a vibrant Christian, but he had never shown any evidence of new birth. Spencer writes how he visited this man at home to share his concern for his soul. The man admitted that even though he attended church, he’d never felt any love for God and had never experienced any spiritual power. He was open with Spencer and told him that he lived a gloomy and fearful life. Spencer assured him that God held out a way of salvation if only this man would yield his life to Jesus as Saviour and Lord. The man offered to try, but nothing happened. This went on for months.

One day Spencer ran into the farmer bringing his wagon into town. As they talked Spencer noticed a brown jug under the farmer’s seat—a jug probably not that unlike the one the woman had brought to Jacob’s Well. He had his suspicions about the jug and asked the farmer about it. The farmer showed him that it was full of rum. Now, the farmer was no drunk, but as he talked to him, Spencer realised what had been happening. The farmer found that whenever he was spiritually troubled, he’d minister to himself with the rum. The problem was that those were just

the times when the Holy Spirit was pressing on the farmer's heart to lead him to Jesus. Instead of letting the Spirit lead him, the farmer was dulling it all with the rum. The problem wasn't alcohol as such, but a worldly source of relief that was standing in the way of repentance and faith in Jesus. The same happens to all sorts of people. Sometimes it may be alcohol, but I've observed that even more often it can be television, video games, sports, shopping...you name it; the Spirit calls and he drown out his calls with worldly attachments.

Spencer writes how he urgently called on the farmer to renounce his fleshly compulsion. There was a large rock near the wagon and Spencer writes, "His eye fixed upon it, and then glanced back to the jug upon his knee. Then he looked at the rock, and then at his jug again, and then at me. And thus his eye continued to wander from one to another of these three objects, as if it could not get beyond them....Finally he seized the poor jug by its side, wrapping the long fingers of his right hand half round it, and slowly rising from his seat, he stretched up his tall frame to its full length, and lifting the brown jug aloft...he hurled it, with all his might, against the rock, dashing it into a thousand pieces." In less than a month, Spencer says, the farmer turned to Christ having turned back from the worldly thing that was keeping him from faith.

Finally, third, when the Samaritan Woman was born again she immediately became concerned for the souls of the people she knew. John tells us that she left her jar at the well and went away into town, calling to the people, "Come and see a man who told me all I've ever done! Can this be the Christ?" I like the way Rick Phillips puts it: "This part of the woman's story depicts what is true of us all, namely, that the day of her conversion to Christ was also the day of her appointment as an evangelist."

Scripture tells us that we are all given gifts by the Holy Spirit in order to build the Church up. Some of us are gifted as teachers or preachers. Some are gifted

to help others and to show mercy. Some are even gifted specifically to be evangelists. And yet evangelism isn't the duty of "evangelists" alone. We're *all* called to share the Good News of Jesus and the Cross. In fact, it's more than just a calling or a duty. I know that it often feels that way—especially when we realise, as we saw last week, that it means confronting sin—but sharing Jesus with others should never be a chore—it should be the natural overflowing of the living water that Jesus has given us. John Calvin wrote, "This is the nature of faith, that when we have become partakers of eternal life, we wish to bring others to share with us; nor is it possible that the knowledge of God shall lie buried and inactive in our hearts without being manifested before men, for that saying must be true: *I believed, and therefore I will speak*, (Psalm cxvi. 10)."

Think again of John Newton. If there was ever a man to be ashamed of his life of sin, if there was ever a man to be forgiven and then spend his life in quiet and embarrassed hiding, it was John Newton. And yet he was saved and transformed by God's grace and couldn't help but to go out and lead other men and women to that same amazing grace. The Samaritan Woman wasn't all that different. Here she was, going to the well in the heat of the noon sun because that was when no one else was there. The other women went early in the morning, but this woman wasn't welcomed by the others. And yet as Jesus' living water overflowed from this woman's heart, her first response was to run back to town so that she could tell the Good News to those same people who had shunned her. Even more important than staying with Jesus to learn more about her new faith was the need to go and share it right away with others. She could sit at Jesus feet and learn from him later. In fact, that's presumably what she did. John tells us that Jesus stayed in Sychar for two full days.

The new birth had instilled in her a love for others that ran contrary to fallen human nature. It was the love of God that Jesus had shown her and that love

was the final proof of her new birth. In conclusion not again: First she confessed her faith in Jesus; second, she showed her new faith in a changed life; and third, she showed her concern for the salvation of others by running to tell them about Jesus. Those are the signs of new birth; those are the signs that a life has been transformed by his living water. Those are the signs we should see in our own lives and they're the signs we should hope to see in the lives of the people with whom we share Jesus—and until we see those signs, we keep sharing.

Please pray with me: Father, thank you for the living water you offer through Jesus. Thank you for the forgiveness we find at the cross. Let that living water never grow stagnant in our souls. As it did in the Samaritan woman, may it bubble up and spill over and drives us to share it with the people around us. And, Father, as we share Jesus with the world, may your Spirit cause our message to bear fruit: confessions of faith, changed lives, and a desire to share Jesus with still more people. We ask this in his name. Amen.