

Encounters with Jesus
Part 2: The Insider and the Outcast
February 7th & 8th 2015

We're continuing a series of messages we began last week called *Encounters with Jesus*. We're looking at several accounts in the gospels where ordinary men and women encountered Jesus Christ with all of their hopes, dreams, questions about life, and suspicion concerning God. And after spending time with Jesus, they walked away deeply changed!

If you're unfamiliar with the gospels, they are historical biographies of the life of Jesus Christ! One of the fascinating things about the gospels, which give us evidence that these are true, historical accounts, is that many of the details in the narrative are so completely counter to what we know to be true in the rhythm and rhyme of our social and cultural setting. So that if we were to fabricate a story about the life of Jesus Christ, we would never write it in the way that the gospel writers did. **I'll give you an example!**

Oscars: The Academy Awards are just a couple of weeks away! Many of you probably don't know this because you're still basking in the glory of last week's victory over the Seahawks (Can I get a woohoo! How about that interception?). There are, however, a handful of you who don't care about football or who endure your spouse's obsession with the game, and now that the Super Bowl is over, you've taken a deep sigh of relief, and are ready to watch the Oscars.

Fascinating thing about the Oscars; I've never been invited! It's way out of my league on many spectrums including all-around coolness. And I'll go out on a limb and guess that most of you haven't been invited either, right? You must be significant in the eyes of our culture to walk the carpet, which is why you'll rarely find the best actors, actresses, and filmmakers in the world standing alongside ordinary people.

It's a social and cultural reality, and if I just busted your bubble, I'm sorry!

The world in the first century was no different! In fact, social and cultural divides were infinitely stronger than they are in our modern, western world. A person's influence was determined by their heredity, earning-power, gender, and place in the power structure of society.

For a Jew living in a Roman society during that time, significance would have also been determined by one's affection for God and commitment to his law!

You might be asking, "What do the Oscars and Roman society have to do with me?" I'll tell you!

In John, chapter 3 and 4, Jesus encounters two people...

The first was a wealthy, God-fearing religious leader with tremendous political, social, and economic influence. A red-carpet kind of guy through and through!

The second was a social and moral outcast from a despised village in Ancient Israel. Who, even had she dreamt of leaving her hometown to walk the red carpet, would have been held back by the shame and stigma of her own story.

Now, because we tend to read the Bible through culturally colored lenses, their stories appear to be very different. But I want to look at what their encounters with Jesus have in common...and what they teach each of us about how we too can encounter Jesus personally!

Let's look at her story first, which is found in the gospel of John, chapter 4...

"(Jesus) had to go through Samaria on the way. Eventually he came to the Samaritan village of Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noontime. Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Please give me a drink.' The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, 'You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?'" John 4:4-7, 9-10

Jesus enters a Samaritan village and strikes up a conversation with a Samaritan woman, which may not seem unusual to you, but notice her shock that Jesus would even speak to her! **Why is she so surprised? I'll give you three reasons!**

First, the Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies. Centuries before, when most of the Jews were exiled to Babylon, some of them stayed behind and intermarried with other Canaanites and essentially formed a new tribe, the Samaritans. They then took parts of the Jewish and Canaanite religions and created a new syncretistic religion!

As a result...the Jews considered the Samaritans racially inferior heretics.

On top of this, it was scandalous in Jesus' day for a Jewish man to speak to a strange woman in public.

Finally...this wasn't just any woman at the well! The text says that she came to the well at noon, while most women came in the early part of the day while it was still cool! We discover later on that she had been married to five different men, and was living with a sixth man who wasn't her husband. And every commentator agrees

that even within her little marginalized community she would have been labeled a social and moral outsider...which is why she is at the well alone!

When Jesus spoke to her, he deliberately reached across every racial, cultural, gender and moral barrier! Which is why she questions Jesus; “Why are YOU asking ME for water?” Now...Notice Jesus’ response!

“Jesus replied, ‘If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water. Anyone who drinks this (well) water will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give them will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them giving them eternal life.’” John 4:13-14

This isolated young woman had spent much of her life looking for love and acceptance in the arms of men! And Jesus shows up and says...let’s talk about water!

It seems strange, until you realize that Jesus isn’t talking about literal water at all; He’s speaking metaphorically.

In effect, Jesus is saying to her, “You’re thirsty at a soul-level, and you’ve been trying to fill your thirst by drinking the love of men. But it’s not working, is it! I am offering you something that is as basic and necessary to you spiritually as water is to you physically. And if you don’t have it, you’ll spend the rest of your life thirsty and empty!”

Now...it’s easy to view this story as a detached spectator! But don’t you see that her story is really no different than ours. We, too, often try to find soul-satisfaction in someone or something other than God!

It’s possible that you are trying to fill your soul-thirst in the arms of lovers! So, you’re going from one woman or man to another thinking that the next encounter is going to finally satisfy. You may be trying to find intimacy on a computer screen, but the images that give you a fleeting sexual high leave you empty and lonely, isn’t it true!

Some of you are trying to fill your heart with physical beauty! Ladies, the culture has told you that if you can get a certain image, or if a young man finds you desirable, you’ll be somebody! But the more you look in the mirror, the more blemishes you see, and even when a perfect young man sweeps you off your feet, he still smells in the morning and chews with his mouth open! No matter how attractive or desirable you become...you’re still thirsty!

Some of you may be trying to fill your soul through money! You see money gives you a sense of power and security! But very few find the kind of wealth their heart desires, and even if they do, it never satisfies fully!

Celebrities: I was recently listening to an interview with Celene Dion, who said that she grows tired of her own music, and even wishes she had never performed the blockbuster hit for the movie *Titanic*, "My Heart Will Go On." That song was epic, and she despises the sound of it!

Woody Allen has been quoted as saying that he's never watched one of his films after its release because he would only see what's bad about them, and grow to hate them.

Can you imagine being a world-class film producer and yet never watching one of your own films post-production?

We imagine that if we can only get a certain measure of wealth and influence, or beauty and power; we'll be happy and full! But even the few who have been there will tell you that money, sex, accomplishment, and fame will never satisfy your deepest thirst!

They things will never satisfy because our hearts were created for something far greater than anything this world can offer! And just like the woman at the well, we will remain thirsty until we find the living water Jesus spoke of!

Now, some of you might be thinking. *"Ok, Jed...I think I get it. You're going to tell me that if I want to encounter Jesus, I need to get some religion in my life!"*

I don't think so! In fact, in our next story we find that religion won't work either! Go to John 3:1.

"There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. Rabbi, he said, we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you. " John 3:1-2

Stop there for a moment... Nicodemus was both a respected and influential civic and religious leader. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Hebrew people's equivalent of a Supreme Court. He was also a Pharisee...a devout, upstanding, pulled-together, moral and religious man!

If the woman at the well was a social and moral outsider, Nicodemus is the Straight-A, Varsity, insider!

So, when Nicodemus approaches Jesus, you would expect Jesus to say, "My man, Nick, you just keep doing what you're doing...you're a model citizen in God's kingdom!"

Listen to Jesus' response!

"Jesus replied, I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God. What do you mean? Exclaimed Nicodemus. How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again? Jesus replied, I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don't be surprised when I say, You must be born again." John 3:3-7

When Jesus says, "You must be born again," some of us immediately think of the person handing out religious tracts at Fenway or shouting on the street-corner, "You must be born again, or else!" These images taint our ability to understand what Jesus is saying. **Let me try to help!**

Birth – When our children were born, without exception, they had nothing to do with coming into the world! Let's be honest, I had very little to do with their births! Beth was the real champion, and there wasn't a single one of our children who slid into the world, turned around, and said, "Thanks for the help, mom!"

You had nothing to do with your own birth...period! You didn't earn the gift of life or contribute in any way to your existence. You were simply born by God's grace and creativity with a little help from your parents!

The same is true of spiritual rebirth! You and I don't play a role in saving ourselves! We don't work to earn God's favor so that He'll go, "Man, that guy is worthy of my love!" No...God, in his mercy, works out his salvation in us by bringing us to faith in Him, convicting us of sin, softening our hearts toward repentance, giving us a love for Him, and desire to place our lives in His hands!

From beginning to end, spiritual birth...just like physical birth, is something that someone else must do for you! And in the same way you must be physically born if you're going to live, you must be spiritually reborn if you're going to experience the life God created you for!

Tim Keller, in his work *Encounters with Jesus*, writes...

"This is an astonishing thing to say to a man like Nicodemus. Jesus is saying that the pimps and the prostitutes outside on the street are in the same

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position, spiritually, as he. There is Nicodemus, flush with his moral and spiritual accomplishments, and there is someone out on the street who is homeless and addicted, and as far as God is concerned they are equally lost. They both have to start from scratch. They both have to be born again. They both need eternal spiritual life or something will eat them alive. And that life is going to have to be a free gift."

Most people reading these two stories, side-by-side, understand that the woman is a sinner in need of salvation! But most of us wouldn't place a religious leader in the same boat as her!

Yet Jesus looks at them both and says, "Without the merciful and miraculous intervention of God in your life, you're sunk!"

Let's be honest...many people today (probably some of us) hold to the idea that if there is a red carpet in heaven, some people are worthy to walk it and others aren't! And we create categories in our minds to tell us who's in and who's out! For example, maybe you're thinking, "God will have me because I was born into this religious family...I participated in all the sacraments...I'm a kind and loving person; or, I go to church regularly and give my time and resources away."

If so, you're like Nicodemus. You believe that a personal encounter with Jesus is possible because you've been good, devout, and moral! But, Jesus shows us that if we think for a moment that our goodness will get us into God's presence, we're fools!

At the same time, there are some of you who, like the woman, believe that God would never have you because you have a soiled past, or a secret sin that is tearing you apart! As a result, you live with an unbearable shame and stigma that you're certain you'll never outlive!

Please hear me. If you believe that God will have you because you're very good...or that God won't have you because you're very bad...Jesus won't let you stay there!

You see...the Good News that Jesus came to bring tells us that we can't get into God's presence because of our goodness, and yet we're not excluded from God's presence because of our badness!

Listen to the words of the Apostle Paul...

"But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!)...God saved you by his grace

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when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it." Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9

God loved us and poured out His mercy on us even when we were dead in our sins! (Cold, hard, and unresponsive)

Jesus Christ died our death to give us life! And now...by God's grace, He has freed us from sin, forgiven our past, given us new beginnings, and by the power of His Spirit He is restoring our lives to be the people He created us to be!

God's work in us is a gift...so, we don't boast! But we do celebrate Christ and the marvelous gift of mercy and life that is ours in Him!

The reality is that we've all looked to something else besides God for our salvation. Whether we're looking to pleasure, sex, money, and power to make this life worth living; or looking to our own goodness and moral achievement to earn God's approval, we're equally lost in sin! We desperately need for Jesus to give us the life that only He can give!

So...what do we do? Let me give you two things!

Application

Respond to the Gospel – Maybe today, you've heard the gospel for the first time in a way that your heart understands! For the first time, you can identify with the woman or the religious ruler! If the truth of Jesus Christ's goodness and mercy is pressing into your heart, respond to Him personally!

Listen to His invitation in John 4:13!

"If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water."

If in your heart, you know Jesus' is offering you a life that you don't have (eternal, joy, limitless, rest, peace), ask Him for it! Say, *"Jesus...please accept me on the basis of your goodness, not mine! I'm sorry for trying to earn my way to you. I'm sorry for running from you! My life is yours!"* Respond to Him!

Celebrate the Gospel – Martin Luther (16th century church reformist) – *"Works-based righteousness is the default mode of the human heart."* Most Monday mornings,

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we wake up believing that God smiles at us because we're good and loveable. So...if you had a bad weekend, watched too much Netflix, yelled at your kids, drank one too many with your friends, you believe that God no longer likes you! But if you went to church, volunteered at Harbor, and brought a friend with you, God smiles!

God's goodness and favor doesn't depend on our goodness, but on Christ's! Immerse your heart in the gospel. Ask God to help you rest in it! Over and over again...your heart will be released from fear and pride, and you'll grow up into the freedom and fullness of Christ!

Baptism – Baptism is a celebration of the gospel! That's why we do it publicly. It's messy...a hot tub...water everywhere...a bit unscripted. Yet, every person who steps into the water is saying two things! First, *"Jesus, I need you to rescue me. Apart from you, I have no affection for you or desire to live for you! I recognize the mess my sin has made, the divide it has created, and Jesus I long to be reunited with you to be brought back into the arms of my Heavenly Father! I need you!"*

And, *"Jesus, I want you to be the King of my life from this day forward! If you loved me so much to lay down your life for me...you're worthy of everything, so insofar as I can tell today, my life is yours!"*

Here's the deal...baptism isn't just for the people in the water! It's for the church. A reminder of how far God went to bring you back into His arms! When you see people getting baptized remember...that's my story!

That's our story! Let's celebrate that right now...

Pray