**The Best Evangelist**

John 4:7-14

***Who is the best evangelist?*** Picture in your mind that person. What do they look like? What do they sound like? What are they wearing? How much education do they have? What kind of background do they have?

Do you have a picture?

I had a youth ministry class and we did this exercise with the question - ***who is the best youth pastor?*** The professor made us actually draw a picture of the ideal youth pastor. And of course, we all drew more or less the same thing: a tall, athletic looking young man - with 30 year old John Krasinski ruffled hair, a trim goatee, a guitar on his back upside down, in jeans and sneakers with a clever T-shirt of some kind. Yes, the ideal youth pastor. We all had stars in our eyes and obviously were envisioning ourselves. Me. I’m the ideal.

Of course, the assignment was a trap and we all fell right in. The point of the exercise was to show the best youth pastor is not one person - no matter how impressive or charismatic or attractive or articulate. **The best youth pastor is a TEAM**. If you have to focus on the leader of the team you’ll see him or her as a developer of other people, an equipper, a servant leader.

Now. Who is the best evangelist? Just ponder and we will come back to that at the end.

Of course, on one level we know that **JESUS was the best evangelist**. And we will all be better evangelists to the extent that we become like Jesus and follow his example. So let’s walk through John 4 and see the ***ten simple and very doable steps*** Jesus took to reach this woman who was very far from God, though she probably didn’t realize how far she was.

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Listen to the **Spirit’s** leading

“He left Judea and departed again for Galilee. And he had to pass through Samaria.” John 4:3-4



Verse one tells us that ***Jesus was gaining momentum in ministry*** - baptizing more followers than John the Baptist was - and this was attracting attention from the Pharisees - the religious leaders of the Jews. So, not wanting to attract attention yet, he left Jerusalem and went back north to Galilee - to the country.

Now, when it said “he HAD TO” pass through Samaria - what does that mean? **Look at the map.** There is no doubt that the direct route went right through Samaria. But most Jews were used to crossing the Jordan and strolling thirty miles out of the way through Perea in order to AVOID Samaria. Probably Jesus himself had done this numerous times going back and forth from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the annual festivals.

***But not this time.*** He “had to” pass through Samaria. He felt compelled to. He sensed it was necessary to take a less customary path. In other words, the Holy Spirit led Him to go where he usually would not go.

Now, this doesn’t happen to me all the time. ***But once in a while I’ve had a sense of a specific place to go.*** Around two years ago I had a lunch appointment at Whole Foods, there on Northdale. I finished my previous meeting and had about 45 minutes before the lunch appointment, and there was something about Northdale Park that just drew my attention. I had not been there before - I knew the park was there and I was curious about it. I think at the time I was wondering if there were volleyball courts somewhere (there are not).

Anyway, I went to the park and just planned to walk around it and pray and maybe sit at a picnic table and read my Bible. But as soon as I started onto the sidewalk I realized it would be a little creepy to walk around the back where the playground is, with all the moms and little kids. So I turned aside, aiming for the picnic tables - and saw a young man sitting alone. I asked if he was up for some company and he seemed open to a chat. So I sat down.

Turned out his name was **Joshua Benjamin**. No kidding. How could I possibly transition to spiritual matters? No idea. Brick wall. Anyway, it ended up being a good gospel conversation and I’ve seen him probably a dozen or more times since then - along with several other Oakwood guys who have followed up with him as well. The point for this first step is to LISTEN to the Spirit’s leading.

***What is the Lord nudging you to do right now?*** Is there a specific person on your heart and mind lately? Might be someone you know, from your past - might be someone you’re aware of but you don’t really know them. Might just be a feeling that you need to go some place. Someone here is like HOBBY LOBBY - I knew I was supposed to go there today. Home Depot. Not everything is from the Holy Spirit, ok? But step one is to listen to the Spirit’s leading.

Jesus felt he “had to” go to Samaria - even though it was unusual, against customs. But he followed the Spirit and this departure from the norm was what made it possible to reach a woman who was far from God. Step two:

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Don’t hide your human **weakness**

“Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well.” John 4:6

It was the middle of the day. It was hot. Jesus was tired and thirsty. Instead of being all “manly” and hiding his weakness, Jesus just sat down. A Samaritan woman approached:

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Don’t hide your human **weakness**

“Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’” John 4:7

This sounds ***a little rude to us*** - “No please, there Jesus?” But the act of addressing her in any way was going to be shocking, so Jesus got straight to the point of asking her for help. Now, there is no indication in the text here that she ever got around to GIVING him a drink. In verse 28 it says she left her water JAR there and took off - but we don’t even know if she ever filled it for herself.

The application for us is **not to hide our needs and weaknesses** - but to realize that they can be doorways into conversation.

* Who is best positioned to reach people battling cancer? A believer with cancer.
* Who is the best evangelist for someone struggling with depression? A believer who has dealt with depression.
* Addiction. Lost job. Lost spouse. Divorce. Infertility. Wayward children.
* ***NOTHING IS WASTED in the kingdom of God.***

God will use every ounce of your suffering and pain to encourage someone else. And the thing with weakness and pain is that it doesn’t have to be identical to be relatable. If you’ve gone through any kind of illness, you can relate to someone in physical distress. If you’ve had any kind of relational conflict, you can encourage someone in a conflict now. If you’ve had a season of financial distress, you can pray empathetically for someone who have money issues now.

Don’t hide your weakness. Jesus didn’t. Isn’t this so encouraging to see that **Jesus was fully human**? Yes, He was also fully divine, but his true and real humanity put a dramatic limiter on his full divinity. He could not be everywhere at once. He did not know everything. He had to eat, he had to sleep, he got stressed and irritated. He never sinned. But he was tempted in EVERY WAY as we are.

And Jesus used his weakness here to engage with the Samaritan woman. Sometimes your most winsome approach is not through your strength but through your weakness. It’s always good to try to lovingly serve our neighbors, but ***sometimes it’s even more effective to ask them for help.*** We have a neighbor who is very handy - and we’ve asked for his help on numerous occasions with our house or car or sprinklers or water shutoff. And it really helped to build the relationship. That’s step two. Three:

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. **Engage** with the people you “Bump into”

“How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” John 4:9

This woman was out at the public well at noon precisely ***so she could avoid people.*** All the other women in town came out to draw water early in the morning or later in the evening. Nobody came in the middle of the day. But this woman did - and we find out why in just a couple of verses.

But **Jesus crossed three lines** to engage with her: geography, gender and culture. Most Jews walked around Samaria, as we saw earlier. Men and women did not talk outside of family relationships. It just wasn’t done - as with many Muslim women today - you’re not supposed to make eye contact with them much less talk with them. And Jews, as a hard and fast rule, did not associate with Samaritans - because the Samaritans had compromised their Jewish ancestry by marrying gentiles - generations before. It was a corrupted line. A tarnished lineage. Unclean. Deplorable.

But not to Jesus. He was showing his disciples that ***the gospel is for everyone***. There is no one who is too far gone; no one who is outside the circle of God’s love and pursuit.

Jesus followed the leading of the Spirit to this place at this time. He didn’t hide his weakness, but neither did he let his human weakness keep him from engaging with this woman. His entre was simply a request for water. The woman was surprised - but her answer showed Jesus where she was coming from. Most of us are tracking so far. Step 4.

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Transition to **Spiritual** matters

“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… [for] living water.’” John 4:10

Jesus was the absolute master at taking the most ordinary things and using them to teach us about His kingdom. ***Seeds. Fish. Buildings. Illness. Trees. Fruit. Bread.*** And in this case - WATER. Jeremiah the prophet referred to God as “the fountain of living water” (Jer. 2:13), and confronted the people of God for forsaking that fountain and digging their own wells - broken cisterns that could not hold water. Worshiping other gods was like digging for water in the desert - and only finding sand.

This takes some practice, but over time you learn that ***just about anything can be a transition to spiritual things.***

* Aches and pains, illnesses remind us of our mortality and make us think about eternity.
* Funerals and the loss of a loved one can open a door to talk about faith.
* My go to question is “what’s your church background.” I have an unfair advantage because people eventually find out what I do for a living, and that sets me up to ask the church question.
* But any time someone asks you how your weekend WAS or if you have plans for the weekend you can certainly work in a mention of church.
* Worry and stress can lead you into prayer and peace God gives.
* International news is certainly an opening to talk about the holy land and Israel.
* Major decisions invite us to talk about what matters most.

If we are going to reach people far from God, we need to grow in how we have spiritual conversations. The book God Space challenges us to prepare a couple of ***“spiritual appetizers,”*** that you have ready to serve at a moment’s notice. One or two brief God stories of how you have seen God at work in your life recently. You can serve one up and see if the person is hungry for more. And that leads to step 5.

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Point to Jesus as the **Answer**

“Are you greater than our father Jacob?” John 4:12

Jesus offered living water and the woman was stuck on the idea of literal water. How could Jesus - who had just asked HER for water - suddenly give her magic water that you drink and are never thirsty again? It was like Nicodemus with the “born again” thing. These guys struggled with the metaphors.

But, of course, the answer - is Jesus greater than Jacob? Uh, yeah. The woman was beginning to see where the conversation was heading. By opening with a physical need, Jesus prepared the conversation to move to the greater, spiritual need. And for that - HE was the only answer.

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Point to Jesus as the **Answer**

“Whoever drinks the water I give him will never be thirsty again.” John 4:14

***There is a water that only JESUS can give.*** We know from John 7 he was talking about the Holy Spirit as the spring of water that wells up from inside you. But you can only receive the Holy Spirit by first committing to Jesus in personal faith.

Water is life. Without water you die.

Jesus is life. Without Jesus, you die forever.

Water satisfies our thirst. ***Jesus satisfies our deep spiritual thirst.*** In fact, He satisfies all of our deepest desires: for love, joy, peace, meaning, power, truth, hope - everything. Jesus is the fountain of living water. If you find yourself dry and thirsty it is not that something has gone wrong with the fountain. It is that you have been going somewhere else to find water.

And guess what? ***There is nowhere else to go.*** Everything else will let you down and leave you thirsty. So we need to point people to Jesus. He is the answer. Whatever their question, Jesus is the answer. Whatever their need - Jesus can help. Whatever their deepest desire - it can only be truly fulfilled in Christ. We need to be careful as we build relationships with people that we don’t elevate OURSELVES as the answer - leading people to think we are so kind and helpful and positive. Hopefully they will like us in general - it’s no good being an obnoxious jerk. But our job is to lift up JESUS, not to impress people with ourselves.

Step six.

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Gently introduce **Sin** as the problem

“Go, call your husband and come here.” John 4:16

Jesus is the answer. What is the question? ***Jesus is the cure. What is the disease?***

SIN. Ultimately what people need is Jesus because ultimately their greatest problem is SIN in their own hearts.

The woman was interested in this magical water Jesus offered. So it was time for the big conversation - and Jesus nudged her to go get her husband. Now, did Jesus know her whole story in advance, or did the Holy Spirit reveal the details right at this moment? The lady says, “I have no husband.”

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Gently introduce **Sin** as the problem

“You are right in saying ‘I have no husband,’ for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband.” John 4:17-18

Jesus affirmed the woman for telling the truth - even if her version of the truth was deliberately evasive. It was technically true that she had no husband at that moment. She conveniently glossed over the fact that she had been married five times already and that she was shacking up with a guy.

***Jesus was so gracious.*** He didn’t come out swinging and attack her for being a floozy. He certainly could have. But Jesus did not use his insight into her story and heart to crush her. He used it to draw her out - to show her what her real need was.

We know that Jesus is the answer - because we know that SIN is the problem - and ***Jesus is the only One who can deal with the problem of sin and death.*** People tend to think that their problems are the problem - money, relationships, work, health. But all of our other problems are SYMPTOMS and the root cause is SIN. Once you call on Jesus to forgive your sins and come into your life, you have a deep and lasting peace to walk through all the other problems life will throw at you.

We elevate Jesus as the answer and sin as the problem. And we expect people to get dodgy at this point.

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Navigate through the **Smokescreens**

“Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain…” John 4:19-20

Instead of breaking down and weeping over her sin and the painful consequences she had suffered and caused, the woman makes **this total non-sequiter**, turning the attention from herself and her sin to the MOUNTAIN behind them. Huh?

“I perceive that you are a prophet.” Instead of acknowledging the SIN Jesus has just pointed out in her life, she turns the conversation to her impressive INSIGHT. “I PERCEIVE.” Do you?

This is very common as we engage with those who are far from God. ***Remember they are spiritually blind.*** They can’t see what they can’t see, and they don’t know what they don’t know. They have guides who are also blind - and they keep falling into the same pits and traps.

* There can’t be a God because of all the evil and suffering in the world.
* If God is so good, why did He allow all this pain in my life?
* I know I need to deal with God and stuff - but right now these other things are more pressing: work, money, health, family, marriage…

The number of smokescreens is infinite. But the way to navigate through them is:

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Make **Jesus** the issue

“‘I know that Messiah is coming…’ Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am he.’” John 4:25-26

The name of Jesus is a sharp knife. It cuts to the heart of the matter. Take the problem of evil and suffering. If you focus on the pain in your life or the terrible things that happen in the world, you will have a hard time believing in a God of infinite love. ***But if you look at the CROSS*** - if you look at Jesus and His infinite sacrifice for your sin and mine - you will see and experience the grace and love of our infinitely generous God.

The same thing is true for every problem. Now, if someone is physically hungry, buy them a burger - get them a water bottle - and then make Jesus the issue. I’m not saying you cut to the chase immediately in every conversation - **this takes discernment**. If you’re talking with a neighbor you are likely to see again, you can take a little longer to get to Jesus. But in my experience, if you don’t bring up spiritual things in the first 2-3 conversations it will become increasingly difficult to do so later. I find it better to introduce God and church and Jesus to a relationship pretty early on - and expand on those early conversations as opportunity allows.

But in the end the past doesn’t matter. Maybe you’ve known someone for 20 years and have never mentioned spiritual things. Pray for an opportunity and listen to the Holy Spirit this week - transitioning to spiritual things by mentioning church or prayer or sharing a spiritual appetizer of how God has worked in your life recently. And if the Lord provides an opening, make Jesus the issue.

Isn’t it remarkable that ***this Samaritan woman knew so much about worship*** and about the Messiah? Clearly God had been preparing her for a long time. She knew the controversies. She knew the promises in the Old Testament. She had hope in a coming Messiah. She just needed to see how Jesus is the key that unlocks the Bible and the meaning of life.

“I who speak to you am he.”

***Jesus rarely made such a clear statement***, especially this early in his ministry. His favorite line was, “He who has ears let him hear.” Huh? But for this woman who was at the same time far from God and yet near to the heart of God - Jesus proclaimed His true identity clearly and plainly.

This is our great privilege and joy - to introduce people to the Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the World. Make Jesus the issue. Two more keys.

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Remember the best evangelist is the **Normal Believer**

“Just then the disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman.” John 4:27

I had to include this verse. Our son, Caleb, was leading a group of college guys in a Bible study through John and they came to this verse and they all started laughing. “This is exactly how we feel when we see a member of this group talking to a girl - ‘they marveled that he was talking with a woman.’”

See, Jesus knew something that we struggle to believe. He knew that the best evangelist is the normal believer. He knew this Samaritan woman, who appeared so far from God - so unqualified for ministry - would be one of the best evangelists of the first century.

***When you imagined the best evangelist, what did they look like and sound like?*** What was their resume like? Be honest now - how many of you thought of Billy Graham? Tall, handsome, eloquent, educated, just a little southern sounding. Now, praise the Lord for Billy Graham and those like him. But hear this. Billy Graham is not the best evangelist. First of all because he’s with the Lord and can’t share the gospel anymore. But also because no preacher is the best evangelist.

The best one to share about Jesus is ***the average, everyday Christian***. And there is a special magic with a brand new believer - because of their passion and joy in being forgiven and set free in Christ. But every follower of Jesus - the most normal one - is the ideal evangelist.

If you believe that you have to get a seminary education and advanced training in apologetics before you can effectively share the gospel with someone you will never get around to sharing about Jesus. So let’s blow this up once and for all.

For the people in your life - ***the best evangelist is YOU***. For your friends, neighbors, co-workers and family members, God has positioned and prepared YOU to testify just like this Samaritan woman. And come on - if she could proclaim Jesus, can’t we all?

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Remember the best evangelist is the **Normal Believer**

“Come, see a man who told me all I ever did. Can this be the Messiah?” John 4:29

Now, let’s ***evaluate this gospel presentation***. Was this the clearest, most impressive articulation of the Messianic expectation? Did the woman clearly acknowledge her sin and express her repentance? Sort of. Did she even confidently proclaim Jesus as Messiah? She more presented it as a question. But look at the response.

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Remember the best evangelist is the **Normal Believer**

“They went out of the town and were coming to him… Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.” John 4:30,39

The response was so significant they stayed two more days - in SAMARIA. What a preview of Paul’s mission to the Gentiles!

Notice what was powerful - it wasn’t the woman’s impressive theology or articulate communication. **It was her TESTIMONY**. Sometimes we think we need a really slick gospel tract or video link - but all we really need to reach people is our own story. YOUR STORY is your most powerful tool, even if it feels really mundane and ordinary to you.

***Don’t you see how THAT STORY will relate so powerfully*** to the other normal people in your life? What better way to connect with someone who used to go to church than to tell your story of growing up in church. Maybe you were away from church for a while and recently came back - that represents more and more people in our city! Maybe you were a prodigal and you ran from God - guess what, that’s most of our friends and neighbors out there. Maybe you were religious and just going through the motions for a long time and your heart wasn’t in it until recently - SHARE YOUR STORY!

One more key to reaching people.

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Believe that people are **Ready** to respond

“Lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.” John 4:35

This is so encouraging! Jesus talks about farming as an analogy to evangelism. He says that ***other people have been working in this field for a long time*** - and we will reap the benefit of their labors. That is exactly how evangelism works. If you ever talk with someone and they are ready to commit to Jesus right then, the only reason is that other people have been sharing with that person for a long time. You just have the joy of harvest. Other people cultivated the soil, planted the seeds and watered. Probably for years.

***So don’t be discouraged when your job is to cultivate.*** Breaking up the hard ground of a resistant person is vital work. Build a relationship. Love and pray for and serve people who are far from God. But don’t wait too long before you start sowing some gospel seeds in there. Share spiritual appetizers. Mention Jesus and church and faith and prayer. Share Bible verses. Pass along gospel tracts or parts of your morning devotions.

Don’t get discouraged - don’t grow weary in doing good. ***WE WILL reap a harvest*** at the proper time IF we do not give up. Keep praying. Keep loving. Keep serving and sharing. The fields of Tampa Bay are white for harvest. Let’s keep at the work!

**How to reach people who are far from God:**

1. Go back to step one

“It is no longer because of what you said that we believe… we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.” John 4:42

This is the response we pray and work toward - that people would search the Scriptures themselves and discover the truth - that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah of Israel, He is the one and only Savior of the world.

Let me invite a little group up here on stage with me. Shelley has been coming for a couple of years now and was just baptized in August. Her son, Allan, started coming about a year ago - partly to hang out with mom and partly because he knew he needed to get back into church and God stuff. A few months ago, Shelley’s other son Jack started coming at their invitation. And a few weeks ago, Shelley’s nephew John had his arm twisted and he also filled in their row.

Jack has been working on his testimony for a while now - so he will share for the group today.

Jack shares.

Let’s pray.