

Which Stage of Faith Is Yours?

Have I ever told you about Liz's and my first date? A friend of mine wanted to go see a movie so he said, "Let's double date!" I said, "Okay. I've been meaning to ask out this girl from my Bible class. Let me give her a call." I called Liz; she said, "Yes," so on the weekend we went to see *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, classic Clint Eastwood. There was just one problem: we went to the matinee on Saturday afternoon. It was their practice to run a kids' movie at that time every Saturday. So, we decided, "Why not?" and went in to see *Gypsy Colt*.

We sat surrounded by 8- and 9-year-old girls who all loved horses. Liz had very long hair at the time. As the movie got exciting, the little girls behind us would grab Liz's seat and a fistful of her hair with their sticky fingers and shout, "Jump, Gypsy, jump!" I really know how to make a first impression, don't I?

So, let me ask this, "What was your first impression of Jesus?" When you were first introduced, what did you think of Him? And how much has your opinion changed since that first meeting?

In our text today, we find two stories of first meetings with Jesus. Through these two stories, we'll see four stages a relationship with Jesus goes through. We don't all spend the same amount of time in each stage but, as we identify them today, I think you'll recognize each stage as something that either you've experienced or someone you know has experienced. So, let's begin by identifying...

I. The Four Spiritual Stages on the Road of Faith

These four stages are:

1. Acceptance of God's Existence
2. Desire to Believe
3. Sincere Faith
4. Tested Faith

Now, there are stages before these, like "disinterest" or even "antagonism," but I would call those the stages of unbelief. But with the stage of Acceptance, we're on our way toward a life of faith. The woman at the well is unique in that she goes through three of these stages in a very short period of time. Now, she has an advantage over the rest of us in that she meets Jesus in the flesh! None of us have had that privilege. But she is like many of us in another way, which is that, when she first met Him, she was living with people who knew ABOUT Him but didn't really know Him. Look at verse 7:

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) (John 4:7-9)

Jesus then immediately moves the conversation from the physical world to the spiritual world. He says: (John 4:10)

...“If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

The woman doesn't fully get it but she also doesn't deny that God exists. So, she's like 95% of Americans who, when they say they believe in God, they mean that they believe He exists. Jesus gently tries to move her from the physical realm to the spiritual realm by saying: (John 4:13, 14)

...“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

There are so many levels on which we could study this story, but I'm going to stay on the topic of this woman's spiritual pilgrimage and how Jesus guides her. She's still on the physical level at this point, but she's moving in the right direction. She says:

...“Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” (John 4:15)

Jesus then takes off His mask and reveals His prophetic powers. He says:

...“Go, call your husband...” (v. 16)

She says, **“I have no husband”**... (v.17)

He says, **“You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”** (v.18)

She's shocked but she also sees what she's dealing with and says: **“Sir,” ... “I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”** (v. 19, 20)

Here's the deal - The Samaritans were a mixed race, part Jew and part Gentile. They grew out of the Assyrian captivity of the ten northern tribes in 727 BC. Rejected by the Jews, they set up their own temple on Mount Gerizim, which was right next to the village where this conversation took place. In verses 21 and 22, Jesus acknowledges the theological differences between them, but then He says:

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth. (John 4: 23, 24)

The woman responds:

... “I know the Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” (John 4:25)

Do you see what stage she's in? She intellectually accepts the concept of a Messiah, a Savior who will come to *'explain everything.'* She's not a skeptic or an agnostic. She's in the Acceptance stage. Now watch! Jesus says:

... “I who speak to you am he. (John 4:26)

He openly declares Himself to be the Messiah! And because Jesus prophetically knew the truth about this woman's living situation, she moves from the stage of Acceptance to the stage of a Desire to Believe. She still doesn't fully believe in Jesus, but she sees the benefits of believing. Verse 28 describes it:

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 Christ?" (vv. 28, 29)

She WANTS to believe. Skip down to verse 39:

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers.

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 Savior of the world." (John 4:39-42)

In one day, the woman moves through three stages and in three days many of her fellow townspeople did the same. They all began with a basic Acceptance that God existed but believing that God exists will not save you. Jesus said to the woman, *"IF you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink..."* If she knew, but she didn't know Jesus personally. She was in stage one. Then, through her conversation with Him, she truly gained a Desire to Believe. But I don't think she was truly born again spiritually until the other townspeople met Jesus and they believed. In this way, by staying in this woman's town for two days, meeting her friends and ministering to their needs, Jesus was also SERVING this woman's deepest need. He was serving her need to be believed because my guess is that she did not have a reputation as the most reliable source of information. But once He did that, she truly believed and was solidly in stage 3. She had a Sincere Faith.

As you walk with your friends who aren't believers yet, don't be fooled into thinking that they're saved and going to heaven when they tell you that they believe in God. What they most likely mean is that they accept the fact that He exists. That's not a saving faith! Demons believe that! Even when they say something like, "I really want to have a faith like yours," they aren't there yet. They're moving in the right direction, but they don't have a Sincere Faith until they understand what's blocking them from having a relationship with God, namely their sin. Jesus told this woman that her Samaritan faith was not adequate when He said to her:

"You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews." (John 4:22)

Jesus wasn't saying that she needed to be ethnically Jewish to be saved. But He WAS saying that the Jewish concept of repentance for sin was necessary to be saved. He said it plainly even to His fellow Jews in Luke 13:2, 3:

... "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans... I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Next week, we'll study chapter 3 where Jesus clearly defines what it means to believe. It doesn't mean "I believe that God exists." No, Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He certainly believed that God existed, but Jesus said to him, *"...no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."* Saving faith is dependent upon repentance.

So, let me stop and ask, "What stage of faith are you in?" Acceptance of God's existence? Or, because you have a Desire to Believe, is that what you think is adequate faith to save you? No! John gave us the distinction between "slaving faith" and "saving faith." Slaving faith is thinking that if I do enough good things, if I work hard enough, if I serve God like a slave, then I'll EARN my ticket to heaven. Some of you were taught that growing up but that's not biblical truth.

John said:

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God... (John 1:12)

What does the name "Jesus" mean? It means "The One Who Saves Us." Eph. 2:8-9 says:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast.

When you repent, you'll be forgiven and given the right to be a son or daughter of God. That and that alone is Sincere Faith. Is that where you are today? If you're not there, there's only one way to get there - repent of your sins.

But there's one more stage of faith demonstrated in this passage. We see it in the disciples. It's the stage of Tested Faith.

The disciples went off to get lunch and when they came back, to their horror, not only is Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman but now half the town is coming towards him. Jesus is pumped because not only is this one desperately lost woman seriously considering stepping into a Sincere Faith, but she's got half the town interested as well. And what are the disciples thinking about? Verse 31:

Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something."

Jesus is on the verge of saving an entire town and his disciples want to eat? He says to them: **I have food to eat that you know nothing about.** They say, **"Could someone have brought him food?"** (John 4:32, 33)

Did the disciples have Sincere Faith? Yes, they did. Then what's going on with them? Jesus is Testing their Faith. He's stretching their faith. He's pushing them to look beyond lunch, to stop being controlled by the routine. He's trying to get them to see what's happening - in their spiritual war, God is about to hand them a major, major victory but it won't happen unless they tune in to the spiritual truth of the moment. Jesus stops in the middle of this great, spiritually pregnant moment and huddles with the disciples to wake them up! Listen to it from The Message:

... "As you look around right now, wouldn't you say that in about four months it will be time to harvest? Well, I'm telling you to open your eyes and take a good look at what's right in front of you. These Samaritan fields are ripe. It's harvest time!

The Harvester isn't waiting. He's taking his pay, gathering in this grain that's ripe for eternal life. Now the Sower is arm in arm with the Harvester, triumphant... I sent you to harvest a field you never worked. Without lifting a finger, you have walked in on a field worked long and hard by others."

Many of the Samaritans from that village committed themselves to him... (John 4:35-39a The Message)

Jesus is the ultimate good coach, great conductor, ultimate personal trainer. Really good coaches don't only compliment you when you do it right. If that's all your coach does, get a new coach. Great coaches point out when you're doing it wrong. Jesus loves these guys but He's not going to let them miss a gigantic victory, because the opportunity presented itself at lunchtime! He's testing them, coaching them, refining their faith so that it's ready to react instantly when the Spirit decides to move. Are you mature enough to receive tough coaching, testing from Jesus?

One more thing before we leave this chapter - the Roman official with the sick son. We didn't read this part of the chapter, but after their time in Samaria, Jesus goes back to Galilee, and a government official with a very sick son comes and asks Jesus to come with him to Capernaum, about 20 miles away, to heal his son. Jesus tests this official. He says to him:

"Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders... you will never believe." (John 4:48)

If you were that official and you came to Jesus just because other people said, "Try him! What can it hurt?" or if you thought you'd have to bribe him to come or if you thought your social position would influence him to come - if you came to Jesus with anything other than Sincere Faith, you would never do what this guy did next. He said:

... "Sir, come down before my child dies."

Jesus replied, "You may go. Your son will live."

The man took Jesus at his word and departed. (John 4: 49, 50)

The Roman official passed the test. So, a final question for us is this...

II. Where Do You Find Yourself in This Chapter?

With whom do you identify? There are four main characters or groups of characters: the woman, the villagers, the disciples and the government official. And there are four stages of faith represented: Acceptance of God's Existence, Desire to Believe, Sincere Faith and Tested Faith. Where would you place yourself?

Here's a second question: Where do you want to be? Some of you might say, "Well, after you described the disciples and the government official as being in the Tested category, I don't know that I want to be there. But that's like saying you want to be alive but not healthy. I say that because basically, God's testing is what causes you to become healthy.

Jesus painted a picture for the woman of a preferred future for her, one that would be very different from her present and recent past. Peterson quotes Jesus this way:

...The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life. (John 4:14b The Message)

It takes courage to step from Desiring to Believe to Sincere Faith. And it takes more courage to step from Sincere Faith to Tested Faith. But with each step, you will see and experience a greater display of His Glory. Don't sit down now. Keep moving! Let's pray...