

What Kind Of Person Can Become A Christian?

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[0 : 0 0] we are continuing our study in John's Gospel and we've come to chapter 4 and this is a long chapter, a fascinating chapter and it's one that we'll be looking at over the next three or four weeks or so. Today we're looking at the first section up to around verse 18 or so but we can read again verses 13 and 14.

Jesus said to her, everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. We had only three chapters into the Gospel of John in our study but already there has been a tidal wave of amazing theology and teaching telling us all about who Jesus is and why Jesus has come. John's shown us that Jesus is the eternal beloved Son of God, that He's the one through whom everything has been created and He's the one in whom everything makes sense. John's shown us the joy of the Gospel message, the passion that Jesus has for his father, for his people, the huge sacrifice that Jesus is going to make as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. John's shown us the magnitude of God's love. He's shown us the urgency of the Gospel. He's shown us how important it is that we believe in Jesus and at the end of chapter 3 we have this this stark and inescapable reality that whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life but the wrath of God remains on him. And so even in just three chapters there is so much amazing teaching. There's so much for us all to think about. Jesus is the Son of God. He has come to fulfill God's purposes. He's calling people to believe in him. But all of that raises a massive question. What kind of person can believe in Jesus? Or to put it another way, what kind of person can become a Christian? And that's our title for today and that's the question that we're going to think about. And the reason we're asking that question is because chapter 4 gives us such a magnificent answer. What kind of person can become a Christian? Chapter 4 tells us the person who is nowhere near good enough. And to think about this today we're going to just unpack three things that we see in the passage that we read.

We see a woman who does not match up. We see a well that does not dry up. And we see a God who does not give up. And what I'm hoping is that by the end of this sermon we'll see that this is going to help us understand more clearly why the Gospel is better than anything else that you're going to experience this week or at any point in your life. So let's look at these three together one by one, starting with a woman who does not match up. This is a very fascinating account that we have in John's Gospel because at first glance there's nothing particularly dramatic about it. You do kind of wonder why John are you giving so much attention to this conversation with a nobody at a well in the middle of nowhere. Jesus is on a journey, he stops for a break and while his disciples go to buy food he chats to a woman who he meets at a well. To us especially first time reading it it can seem very insignificant. And because of that we can easily miss some of what's going on. And the first thing we have to notice is that for somebody who is standing watching this in the first century this whole incident is much more controversial than we might initially realize. And there's three reasons why it's controversial. One is gender. She's a woman and a Jewish rabbi like Jesus wouldn't do this, wouldn't just chat away to some random woman that he'd met. And you can see that the disciples were shocked by this. They say in verse 27 you know they're marvelling that he was talking with a woman. So gender is one of the issues. Second issue is race. She was a Samaritan. And we'll say a little bit more about this next week when we look at that in more detail. But the main thing you need to know if you didn't know it already is that the Jews and the Samaritans hated each other. And that's confirmed in verse 9 where John just throws in a little piece of information that Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. So gender is controversial, race is controversial. Third reason it's controversial is because of her reputation.

[5 : 07] As we discover in the narrative her life circumstances and her background are far from ideal. And all of that immediately makes this passage fascinating. One of the reasons it's fascinating is because what we see in the woman stands in so much contrast to the last person that we saw in chapter 3, Nicodemus. In so many ways Nicodemus seems you know just like like the perfect candidate for someone who would follow Jesus. He's got all the right credentials. But in terms of this woman in pretty much every way she's a woman who does not match up. So what was the woman's story? I made a wee mistake on my screen so I just have to stop this and start it again. Sorry about that. Tom can fix it for me in the back.

Hopefully. Is that it coming back up? There we go. What was this woman's story? Well verses 16 to 18 we're told a little bit about her. We're told that she had five husbands. She's now living with a man who's not her husband. And the question we need to ask ourselves is what should we think of her? What's the first thing? What should our first impressions be of this woman? Now over the years I think a lot of people have often thought about her as kind of a notorious woman. And that's the way I've tended to think of her as well. We think of a woman who's had lots of men in her life. Someone whose behavior is inappropriate. And if we were to use harsh language some might describe her as a slut or something like that. And that is possibly true. But the more I think about it I'm not so sure that that's entirely right. You know when we think about you thinking what's she a man eater? Did she have five men and dump them all and move on to the next one? Probably not. I don't think she was a man eater. I think we're probably more accurate if we think of her more as an easy target for men. Today you know we can think of women maybe on TV or in movies or maybe even in real life who you know are able to get any man they want and they go from one to another and they've got the power and confidence to do that and it shows them shows itself in a life that's that's maybe a bit promiscuous. I don't think it was like that for this woman.

And the reason I say that is because it would have been very very rare for a woman 2,000 years ago in the ancient Near East to have had that kind of power over men. I think unless you were royalty or very rich if you were a woman you would have been at the mercy of whichever man you happen to be with. So did she dump five men and now she's on her sixth? I don't think that that's very likely. I think it's probably more plausible to say that she was dumped by five men. Either that or some of them have died. So she's either a widow or a reject or probably both. Now however she is in a relationship with someone who's not her husband and that was much more of a big deal then than it is now and of course it's not that long ago when that was a big deal in her own culture as well. What all of that means is that when we come to this woman we've probably got a combination of hurt, shame and abandon in the sense of you know just giving up on doing things right and just you know a disregard for what you know is appropriate. So the woman's hurt, she's hurt because her marriages have not turned out the way she would have dreamt. She's ashamed because she's the woman who's had six men and everyone knows it and there's this sense of abandon because so often when people get bruised, when people feel ashamed of how things have gone in their lives they can respond to that by thinking, oh to heck with it. I'm just gonna do whatever. Now there's two crucial things that arise there. One is that this means that in terms of being good enough for the Messiah this woman definitely does not match up. Second crucial thing is that our community and our congregation are full of people whose circumstances might be very different but who feel just like her. So how does Jesus interact with her? How does he interact with somebody who does not match up? Well the great emphasis of this passage is that Jesus knew her. That's what verses 16 to 18 reveal. Jesus is the one who tells the woman about her circumstances not the other way around.

In verse 29 it's emphasized again that the woman's testimony is about a man who told her everything that she ever did and we've already seen this in John in chapters 1 and 2. We've seen that Jesus knew people and Jesus knows this woman and this is incredibly important. This woman did not match up. Her life was not what she dreamt it would be. It's not conforming to other people's expectations. She's got bruises, scars, baggage. She is not Messiah follower material. So often we feel exactly the same and it doesn't matter if you've been a Christian for years or whether you're seeking the Lord or whether you're really not quite sure whether you are a Christian or not a Christian. We all feel like we don't match up. We all carry hurt. Stuff that's gone wrong in our lives maybe in the last week, maybe years and years ago but that's left us bruised and scarred. We all feel ashamed. Jesus asked the woman to go and get her husband and it exposed her circumstances. Now for some people the mess of their lives is very private and hidden for other

people. It's out in the public but no matter who we are we look at our lives and we see things and we think I wish I wish it was different. I wish I hadn't done that. And for all of us you know when we feel like that it's so easy to then think you know well I'm just gonna abandon trying to match up and that can happen in so many different ways to think you know well

I've been hurt. I've been scarred so stuff it. I'm just I'm not gonna bother. I'm not gonna try anymore and it's so easy to react like that. We can do it in loads of ways. We can do it by by drinking too much. We can do it by viewing people around us as enemies that we're never going to forgive. We can do it by looking for intimacy and pornography. We can do it in loads of ways. Most of all we can do it by thinking I'm just gonna push God away. I'm just not gonna do it. I'm not gonna go there. I'm gonna keep him at arm's length. All of that stuff combines to make us think that all the failure in our lives means that we don't match up.

[12:51] As Christians you know we think we look at other Christians and we think I don't match up to them. They're in a far better place than I am. And as people seeking the Lord and people who are not yet shudder for Christians or not we just think I'm just not up there. I'm just not in that category. I am not what I need to be. What is the first thing that Jesus says to anyone who feels like that?

He says I know. And that is just amazing. You think of everything that makes you feel like you don't match up. Everything that you wish was different about you. Everything that makes you feel embarrassed. Everything that makes you think if Jesus knew that then he would never want to talk to me. And yet for every single one of those thoughts Jesus' answer is the same. He says I know. And that I know is not a I know and you can forget having anything to do with me. No it's I know and I have got something that I want to give you. And that takes us to the second thing that we see in this passage. A well that does not dry up. Jesus and the woman are sitting at Jacob's well and that's an area of land that Jacob gave to his son Joseph and you can read about that way back at the end of Genesis. As we said Jesus is on his journey. He's tired. He stops for a rest. Disciples go and buy food and the conversation with this woman begins with Jesus saying can you give me a drink because he's thirsty. And there follows from that a wonderful discussion where Jesus draws a contrast between the water that the woman can draw from the well and the living waters that Jesus the Messiah is able to give.

You see that conversation in verses 9 to 14 in the passage there. Jesus is using the imagery of water to describe what he can give to this woman. So I want you to imagine you're at this well it's roasting hot the ground is parched and to get water you have to go deep down into this well where there's a pool that if you can throw it up you can have a drink and it'll refresh you but it'll only refresh you for a while. You've got to keep going back to the well again and again and again. Jesus says in contrast to that stagnant water sitting at the bottom of the well I can give living water. Now that phrase living water speaks both of the idea of fresh flowing water so you think you the contrast between like well water sitting still at the bottom of a well and then the fresh flowing streams that come as a result of heavy rain. There's that living flowing water there's also the emphasis on the fact that water is life-giving and this isn't the first time that we've seen water in John's Gospel it's already come up a couple of times. We had it at the wedding in Cana when Jesus turned water into wine and doing that he used the big stone jarge that were used for ritual cleansing. In chapter 3 Jesus when he was speaking to Nicodemus spoke of being born of water and of the Spirit and and there he was speaking of the life-giving power of the Gospel and we've also had this emphasis running through the early chapters of the ministry of John the Baptist and the role of water and all of that. So water is a big theme already in these first few chapters. Here Jesus talks about water again but he brings a new emphasis to the image. In chapter 2 water makes us think of cleansing. In chapter 3 water is life-giving. Here in chapter 4 water is thirst quenching and in verse 14 Jesus gives this amazing promise that whoever drinks of the water that he will give will never be thirsty again. So I've just underlined the wrong place look at that sorry there we go never be thirsty again. Now the woman thinks initially that Jesus has been literal. She's like oh how are you gonna get water out of the well you don't have anything to draw anything to you know a bucket basically she says. But Jesus takes the conversation forward and he uses the conversation about her marriages and about where to worship God to show that he's actually talking about spiritual realities. The water that Jesus gives becomes a spring within us welling up to eternal life. In other words Jesus offers a healing, a cleansing, a forgiveness and all of that comes from his well of abundant mercy, love and grace and that well of salvation is never ever going to run dry. That means it is a well where our thirst is quenched. And this is so important because it's taking us back to a key question

that we're trying to answer today. What kind of person can be a follower of Jesus or to put it another way who gets this living water welling up to eternal life? Who's the kind of person who can get it? And the answer is so simple. It's for the thirsty. That's the key qualification for believing in Jesus to be thirsty. Now this though is really easy to misunderstand because when I say thirsty you know and we can think oh yeah well there are some people and they're really thirsty for God you know they're the kind of they're in this category of being really thirsty for God but that's not what I mean. I don't mean thirsty like this kind of badge of honor displaying great spiritual appetite. Some people will sometimes talk like that and they kind of give the impression you know like you know I'm so holy I've got this amazing thirst for God all the time. That is not what I mean because that's not really what thirst is talking about because thirst is not about what you have. Thirst is about what you lack. And if you think about it you know if you're thirsty do you feel good or do you feel rubbish? You feel rubbish? That's the thirst that Jesus has come to quench. Not the kind of super Christian or check out how thirsty for God I am but the thirst that comes here today and says I can't do it. I've got nothing. It's so crucial for us to recognize that. It's crucial for every one of us here who's a Christian because we come here today to

Jesus and we don't bring him a well of achievements or success or qualities. We come with our thirst. Our thirst for a better prayer life. Our thirst for greater wisdom. Our thirst to not keep making the same mistakes and falling into sin. Our thirst for courage to serve Jesus in the week ahead. Our thirst not to be failures.

[20 : 26] Our longing not to be dry spiritually and Jesus says just come and drink. But this is even more crucial for the not yet and for the not sure who are here because if Jesus is promising to quench your thirst it means that he is not saying to you what have you got for me. He is saying what do you need from me.

Thirstiness means that you lack something. It means coming to Jesus saying I don't have it. So often people feel that they don't have what they need in order to be a Christian to come to faith. That's absolutely true because none of us have what we need. The key thing is that being thirsty doesn't mean we stay away.

It means that we come to him. It means that we just go for it. But there's another question that arises here that is really important related to all of this. You know we're saying well you know what kind of person can become a Christian. We're saying it's the person who doesn't match up. It's the person who's thirsty. So what is okay what is it actually involved and what does it feel like? What does it feel like to become a Christian? Well what does thirst quenching feel like? You just think physically what does it feel like to have your thirst quenched? It feels brilliant. It's so good. It's comforting. It's refreshing. It leaves you readying to go and spiritually it is exactly the same. You think of everything that this woman thirsted for. Healing in a heart that he had been broken many times. Compassion from somebody in a world that was all looking at her, judging her for her past. Thirsting for forgiveness for all the mistakes that she'd made. Longing for friendship, for belonging, for love. We thirst for all of these things too. Every human has these same longings. That's the thirst that Jesus has come to quench. But in all of that imagery you know a crucial lesson that's tied in with it is the fact that when we talk about water and thirst and quenching there's one thing that you've got to do. You've got to drink and we drink from Jesus by trusting in Him. That's the great call of John's Gospel that we are to believe in Jesus and that's how the thirst gets quenched. That's how we drink by trusting in Jesus. But we've got to ask how do you do that? What does that involve? Every week Phil and I are standing up here telling you to do that, to trust in Jesus, to put your faith in Him. How do you do that? What is actually involved? Well there's three crucial things and all of them are in this passage. Number one, you listen to Jesus's voice. The woman listened to Jesus at the well. We listen to him as he speaks to us in his word and that means that listening to Jesus isn't about you know waiting to hear some kind of weird inner voice in your mind or something like that. It means listening to what's written down in front of you on the pages of scripture and Jesus is saying to you, he's saying I love you, he's saying I will heal you, I will forgive you, I will look after you, I will hold you forever, I want you to trust me. So we need to listen to Jesus's voice. Number two, you respond to him and that's a very simple thing. It just involves talking to him and that's one key thing that has to happen. If Jesus is calling us, if he's talking to us, calling us in the gospel, you have to talk back, you have to pray to him but that can be a very very simple prayer. It doesn't need to be complicated. It can be a simple statement where you say yes Lord Jesus, I do trust you, please help me or it can be a simple request where you say please forgive me, please

save me or it can be just a simple expression of your yearning where you say Lord Jesus I'm not sure of everything but I know I want this, I know that I want you. The woman responded to Jesus, we have to respond to him as well. So you listen to

Jesus, you respond to Jesus and then there's a third key thing that has to happen and we find it in this passage. The woman listens to Jesus, she responds to Jesus, her response is a little bit messy and she kind of jumps from one subject to the next but it's clear that she gradually recognizes who Jesus is and what he's saying and she believes in him and then the third key thing happens.

There's a sudden clap of thunder and she has a vivid dramatic vision. She hears a voice from heaven, she has a miraculous answer to prayer, she feels an incredible warmth and fire in her heart and she loses any desires for sin, she overcomes every temptation and everything that's wrong in her life is sorted. You can see that in verse nothing because that's not what happens and it's not what needs to happen. The crucial thing that needs to happen, the key third step is not some dramatic conversion experience, she doesn't have it.

[26 : 20] The key thing is that she just gets on with following Jesus. That's all she does.

She listens to him, she responds to him and she just gets on with following him. If you had been watching at a distance and you hadn't heard this conversation, I don't think you'd have noticed much different in this woman before the conversation and after but everything has changed for her. But the thing that's changed is not that she's reached the mountaintop and take to every box, the thing that's changed is that she's finally found the right path and there's a long long way for this woman to go in terms of growing in her faith. She's got a long way to go and so do you and so do I but all Jesus asks us to do is to step onto his path and he will lead us from there. It's a great reminder that Jesus is not looking for a rival, he's looking for followers, he will guide you, he will help you, he will never stop looking after you because his well of salvation is a well that will never run dry. And then the last thing we see very very briefly is a God who does not give up. Throughout the whole of this passage there's been lots of echoes of the Old Testament and throughout John's Gospel there's a great emphasis on God's plans being fulfilled. We've had to mention of Jacob and his well that's taken us way back to Genesis. In fact women drawing water at wells is something that you see several times in the Old Testament. We've got the Jews Samaritan divide that's kind of nearer the end of the Old Testament going back to Second Kings and the period they are late in the Old Testament and as you read on in John's Gospel there's many many more echoes of the Old Testament that are going to come. All of these are pointing us to the fact that in Jesus God's plans are being fulfilled. Now at one level that's reminding us and showing us that everything in the Bible fits together. What the Old Testament foreshadowed is fulfilled in the new and it's a wonderful confirmation of the truth of God's word that the Old Testament prophecies are being fulfilled. But alongside seeing everything fit together across the ages of history this emphasis on fulfillment is telling us something else. It doesn't just tell us that God is effective at accomplishing his purposes. It doesn't just confirm that the Old Testament prophecies were right. It also tells us that God has not given up.

God has not given up. You think of every way that this woman did not match up. You think of everyone else in John's Gospel who doesn't match up. You think of every way that you don't match up that I don't match up. The fact that Jesus came. The fact that all of this happened in John 4 and in the rest of the Gospel all of that is because when it comes to you God does not give up and God is not giving up. And all of that's confirmed by a tiny phrase in verse 10 that is so easy to miss. When Jesus is speaking about the well he says to her if you knew the gift of God and who it is that saint you give me a drink you'd have asked him and he'd have given you living water. Here's a really interesting question. How does Jesus describe his entire mission and his entire plan of salvation that's going to be fulfilled? How does he sum everything up that he's doing from the incarnation to his sufferings to his betrayal, his arrest, his trial, his agony, his death, his resurrection. What does he sum all that up as?

The gift of God. Everything that God is planning and accomplishing through Jesus is summed up in this magnificent phrase. The gift of God. The whole reason we can have salvation through Jesus is because God wants to give it to you. The whole reason God wants to give it to you is because he's not giving up on you. And in many ways that little phrase reveals where the stumbling block really lies.

[31 : 00] The stumbling block is not what God doesn't know and you know we think oh what if God knew this or God knew that. He already knows so we don't need to worry about that. The problem is

not what we know as a church. Often we think you know what if people knew what I was really like. Other people's opinions are irrelevant, totally irrelevant to what God wants to do for you. The problem is not what God doesn't know. The problem is not what other people don't know. The problem is what you don't know. As Jesus says if you knew the gift of God, if you knew the gift of God, it's a gift, a free gift, an unerrant gift, you never need to get yourself good enough for it, gift. And he's offering it to you today because he is not giving up on you. And if there's anything that you take away from this service today, I want it to be that, that God is not giving up on you.

And everything that he promises is a gift that he wants to give you. And in God's name I hope you know that.

What kind of person then can become a Christian? The answer is the person who's nowhere near good enough, which is actually all of us. And this takes us back to the thing I said at the very start that I hope that this sermon would help us to see why the gospel is better than everything else that you're going to experience and encounter this week. The reason it's better is because in pretty much every other part of life if you are going to get what you hope for then you need to be good enough. So school, if you want to get really good grades, well you've got to be good enough. Work, if you want to succeed at work, you want to be a valued colleague, if you want to get promoted, if you want an increase in salary, if you want to climb the ladder, how are you going to do that? Well you're going to do it by being good enough. Relationships, there's a pressure to think well you know if I'm going to find someone I need to try and be good enough so that you know so that they'll like me. In terms of how we look you know to be admired, you've got to make sure you look good enough. Football, you want to play for Carl away, you've got to be good enough. Everything, everything you want to get what you hope for then you've got to be good enough. The gospel is so different and so good because it's for people who don't match up, it will quench your thirst with a well that does not dry up and it's all because God is a God who when it comes to you does not give up. Amen. Let's pray.