

John 4:3-26, 39-42 (ESV)

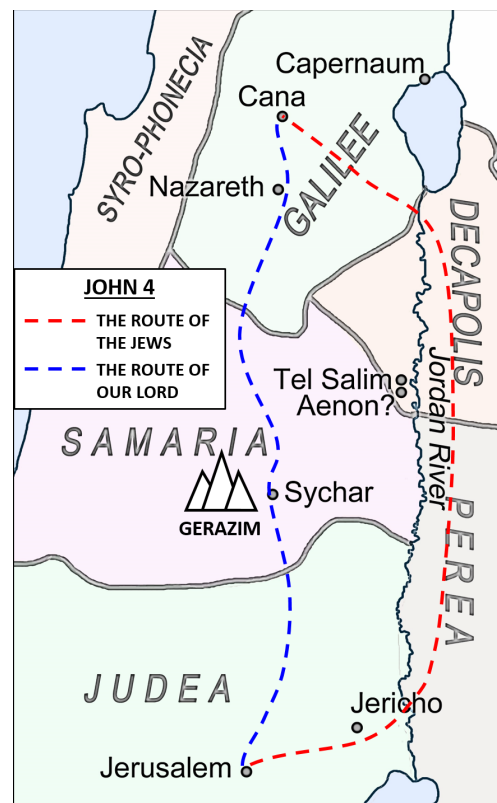
<sup>3</sup> ... (Jesus) left Judea and departed again for Galilee. <sup>4</sup> And he had to pass through Samaria. <sup>5</sup> So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup> Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

<sup>7</sup> A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." <sup>8</sup> (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) <sup>9</sup> The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered her, "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, and he would have given you living water." <sup>11</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" <sup>12</sup> Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." <sup>13</sup> Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup> 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." <sup>15</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

<sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." <sup>17</sup> The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; <sup>18</sup> for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." <sup>19</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup> Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. <sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." <sup>25</sup> The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." <sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

<sup>39</sup> Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." <sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. <sup>41</sup> And many more believed because of his word. <sup>42</sup> They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

\*Greek: *forever*



### On Addictions

Well, before I begin I should explain that I wrote this sermon in the early half of the week, as I was away in Lake Tahoe from Thursday through Saturday. In other words, I wrote this before the seriousness of the coronavirus became evident. Therefore, any of you who may are tired of hearing or thinking about the coronavirus will be pleased to know that this sermon doesn't include another word about it. Perhaps it will be a blessing to focus our minds on something else.

So re-calibrating where we are, it is still the season of Lent. And last few weeks we've talked some about our tendency as sinners to derive our value, security, or comfort from the world. And we all

struggle with this in some way, as more than once in recent weeks I've stated that we are all addicts. Well, today we've been given an example of someone who's caught in the addiction loop in the Samaritan woman at the well in our passage from the Gospel of John. So this morning I'd like to use the story of Jesus' encounter with this woman to talk about how somebody becomes an addict of anything, how addiction works, and also how addiction can be overcome.

But first some background to the passage itself. In John chapter 4, Jesus has left the Judean countryside near Jerusalem and is travelling north toward Galilee. Those of you who have a bulletin can see on the map that between Judea and Galilee is a region called Samaria. Now, Samaria was Jewish territory for many centuries, as indicated in our passage by the mention of Jacob's well being there. But in the few centuries leading up to Jesus' day the region had come to be populated by a group of people known as Samaritans. And Samaritans were gentiles who had embraced the God of Israel (as their own) and who observed the Torah – God's Law – but who thought of themselves as the bearers of the true faith of ancient Israel, which they thought had been distorted by the Jews for the previous thousand-plus years.<sup>1</sup> And they departed from the traditions of the Jewish religion in Jesus' day in some significant ways. For example, the Samaritans most notably had their own temple. Their temple was on Mt Gerizim,<sup>2</sup> where they worshipped instead of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, where the Jews didn't *allow* them to worship. And this is because the Jews and Samaritans refused to associate with one another - in fact, they despised each other - to the extent that if a Jew was travelling from Judea to Galilee, they would go out of their way to avoid contact with Samaritans by going all the way across the Jordan River before going north, so as to not have to step foot in Samaria. However, Jesus doesn't discriminate. So when he travelled between Jerusalem and Samaria, he would go right through Samaria. And this is what leads him in our passage today to come to the Samaritan city of Sychar. It's the sixth hour, which was high noon, and Jesus is worn out from the travel, so while his disciples go into the city to buy food he takes a seat beside the well. And that's when a certain Samaritan woman comes to draw water.

And what this woman's interaction with Jesus will reveal is that she's been attempting to fulfill her god-given needs for security, comfort, and value through *worldly solutions*, apart from God. The paragraph beginning at verse 16 reveals the particular way *this woman* has been seeking to do this is through men. Verse 18 reveals that she has had five husbands, and now she's living with a man who's not even her husband. Now, I'm sure each one of these relationships had begun for her with not only excitement but what must've seemed to her like such promise, but eventually left her with only heartache and emptiness, and even scorn among her peers. As an addict of sexual relationships, who knows how many in her community she would have alienated through adultery or going after their husbands? And what tells us this is that she's coming out to draw water at high noon. The whole community would've come to draw water at this well, but no one would do that at the hottest time of the day. So that's when she can be sure no one else would be there, and why her interaction with Jesus occurs with no one around.

So these attempts to quench her spiritual thirst in worldly ways were clearly not working and had created more problems for her than they solved. But lest we stand in judgment of her, we mustn't forget that we're all addicts. Sure, romantic relationships may or may not be our drug of choice like this one, but I'm sure many of you with bulletins have already stumbled across the list of addictive agents I included today. But let me review this list of the variety of worldly solutions we may be prone to turn to in

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<sup>1</sup> The Samaritans marked the beginning of the Jewish apostasy with the prophet Eli, at the end of the period of the Judges.

<sup>2</sup> built in the 4th century B.C.

vain attempts to quench our spiritual thirst. The first addictive agents on the list are 1. Alcohol or drugs - no surprise. But after that the list includes

#2. Work, achievement, and success

3. Money addictions, such as overspending, gambling, or hoarding money (miserliness)

#4. Control addictions, that surface in personal, sexual, family, and business relationships

5. Food addictions

6. Sexual addictions

7. Approval dependency (the need to please people)

8. Rescuing patterns toward other persons

9. Dependency on toxic relationships (relationships that are damaging and hurtful)

10. Physical illness (hypochondria)

11. Exercise and physical conditioning

12. Cosmetics, clothes, cosmetic surgery, trying to look good on the outside

13. Academic pursuits and excessive intellectualizing

14. Religiosity or religious legalism (preoccupation with the form and the rules and regulations of religion, rather than benefiting from the real spiritual message)

15. General perfectionism

16. Cleaning and avoiding contamination and other obsessive-compulsive symptoms

17. Organizing, structuring (the need always to have everything in its place)

18. Materialism

19. Phone, screens, video game

Now, if we're being honest, I'm sure every one of us can identify more than one of these addictive agents we've developed an unhealthy dependency on.<sup>3</sup> And perhaps this is why author and doctor Gerald May provocatively suggests that "to be alive is to be addicted".<sup>4</sup>

So in a minute I want to talk about how the cycle of addiction functions in our lives. But first I want to explain how these addictions tend to develop in the first place. You see, addictions often begin as a response to an experience of trauma or to experiencing a lack of adequate emotional care from our primary caregivers during our formative years. Now this isn't to blame our parents for our addictions. But no earthly parent is perfect and without deliberate and intentional intervention we're bound to parent either in roughly the same manner that we were parented, which is why every family has patterns of generational sin, or we may parent in reaction against our upbringings, which left to our own devices can be equally harmful.

But to explain this further: when a child experiences a particular trauma or immature parenting, the feeling this often creates is one of worthlessness. It's not that we even need to be *explicitly told* or *consciously think* that we're worthless. Many people may have never consciously thought to themselves "I'm worthless", rather this worthlessness is a subconscious feeling, in particular that we aren't worth enough for our emotional experience to matter. And the reason experiences where we may have felt this way as children are particularly damaging is because children often lack the resources to process those experiences in a healthy manner, or counteract or cope with those feelings of worthlessness. So in order to keep those feelings at bay, we develop habits that can manufacture good feelings, instant gratification. Or psychologically speaking, we use an addictive agent to dissociate from that emotional pain. And in the short term, this seems to work, so we may begin using that addictive agent to dissociate when many different forms of pain arise. So you can see in the bulletin I've printed how the addictive cycle works. We experience pain, so we turn to the addictive agent for the immediate relief, but our dependency on it

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<sup>3</sup> Meaning we use them to help ourselves feel okay.

<sup>4</sup> *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* by Gerald G. May M.D.

produces long term consequences - in other words, more pain - but we don't know what else to do with that pain, so we turn back to the addictive agent. And the cycle goes round and round.

### **Cycle of addiction**

**Pain > addictive agent - immediate salve > results in increased pain > addictive agent**

And most of us have developed multiple habits: a dependency on multiple addictive agents. And yet, you'll notice that many of the agents we listed are not activities we would necessarily consider as bad in themselves. While society and the church may have taboos around drug addiction or sex addiction, dependency on many of the addictive agents listed can be approved by society and the church, or even downright celebrated, such as working hard or rescuing others or exercise, or religiosity (I wonder if that surprises anyone to see that on the list?).

For example, I know one way I dealt with pain growing up was by fusing myself to spectator sports - by watching my favorite teams play. Now, there is nothing wrong with watching sports in itself, but when you use that to dissociate from reality or fuse your emotional well-being to the performance of a team, that can bear some bad fruit.

But to give another example of how the addictive cycle functions with an approved agent like working. The way workaholism might develop is a person experiences feelings of worthlessness (again, it may be subconscious), but finds that if they just work harder than the average joe that the world will reward it with money and success and praise. However, this compulsion leads to consequences in other parts of their life that make them feel like a bad spouse or parent - so again, those worthless feelings are back. But the way they've learned to medicate those feelings is by working more and more. And so, knowing nowhere else to turn, that's what they do and the cycle goes on and only gets worse.

### **Example of Cycle: Workaholism**

**Low self worth > work more for approval > neglect family, miss events > need escape from pain / work more**

But how would this addictive cycle have developed in the case of someone like the Samaritan woman? Well, there's no way of knowing the reason or reasons she would've begun experiencing worthlessness in the first place, but apparently somewhere along the line she decided to counteract those feelings through a romantic relationship with a man. But since no human relationship can adequately fulfill our god-given spiritual needs for comfort, value, and security, she was looking for something out of the relationship that it can never fully provide. So the relationship eventually fell apart, which would've only caused those feelings of worthlessness to return, but even stronger than before. So to dissociate from that increased pain, the woman turned to another relationship, rationalizing that this one will be different. And the cycle goes on and on and on, and the pain and consequences only pile up, such that in her case it's gotten to the point that she can't even draw water any time other than the heat of the day.

So when Jesus encounters this woman, he decides to use the occasion of her drawing water - meant, of course, to quench her physical thirst - in order to reveal to her that he is the answer for the spiritual thirst she's been trying to quench through the worldly means of romantic relationships. After asking her for a drink, Jesus says to her in verse 10 that if she knew the gift of God, and who it was asking her for a drink, she would have asked him, and he would have given her living water. Now she assumes he's being literal, and is puzzled because Jesus has nothing to draw water with. But in verse

13 he explains that while anyone who drinks of well water becomes thirsty again, whoever drinks the water he is offering will never be thirsty again. So he's teaching her that while looking to worldly solutions for our comfort, security, or value may seem to work for a time; ultimately they will prove inadequate; not only failing to cure our pain, but beginning to add to it. However, when we learn to derive our comfort and security and value from him, we will find He *is* sufficient. So where worldly solutions are like this well, which has become increasingly difficult and onerous for her to get any water from (she now has to go in the middle of the day), Jesus is like a spring of water that can always be trusted to supply.

But how can she begin to make this shift? Well, she first has to acknowledge how she is seeking to quench her spiritual thirst with worldly water. This is why when she responds in verse 15 to Jesus, saying, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water," Jesus shifts the conversation toward her romantic relationships. And then, by the end of the paragraph, he makes explicit that he is the Messiah - that *he* is her salvation - meaning she needs to learn to trust him to meet her spiritual needs.

Well, it's the same for us. If we come to recognize how an addictive cycle is wreaking havoc in our lives and relationships, we have to first face up to it and admit that it's a problem. And we can do this by confessing it to another person, whether it's confessing to a priest or another mature believer; confessing to just God is not enough.<sup>5</sup> But once we've done that, we can't just try really hard not to do it. Or we can, but we'll soon find that doesn't work. The whole problem with addictions is that we're powerless to overcome them through the strength of our own will. So the way we short circuit that addiction cycle is not by trying hard not to do the addiction, but by instead allowing Jesus to counteract those feelings of worthlessness with his love and grace. Therefore, the task for us then is to learn to drink from the one who deemed us unconditionally worthy of his love by going to the cross; our task is to learn *how* to spiritually drink from Jesus regularly and effectively. And I say effectively, because this doesn't mean just going to church or doing something religious. Heck, some religious activity and church environments are actually set up to compound that sense of worthlessness rather than alleviate it. That's why religiosity and legalism is on the list of addictive agents. But as we learn how to spiritually turn our hearts to Jesus and actually receive the comfort and sense of security and value we need from Him, then we will come to yearn for that addictive behavior less and less. #

But let me be clear that learning to trust Jesus for all of this doesn't mean we become monks & nuns or that we should expect him to meet all of our needs directly. In fact, Jesus may often meet some of our needs through the created world of people and things. You see, Christianity does not teach that everything in the material world is bad, but rather that God lays out boundaries for how to properly engage it. So trusting the Lord to meet our needs means learning to look for Him to do that perhaps directly at times, but also through worldly means, but within the boundaries he's laid out; not through treating the things of the world as ends in themselves, but enjoying them appropriately and responsibly. So the Lord may provide for our need for comfort through another believer; part of Him assuring our need for security may come through the provision of money; or He may bolster our sense of value by having someone say to us "good job" when we do something well. But we recognize that in a future situation He may provide for that need in a different way, but all of it is a gift from Him, and that He is the provider we trust behind it all.

But let me also state that as simple as this may sound, to re-orient our lives to trust Jesus in this way, it is most definitely not easy. In fact, I think one of the biggest mistakes when people read this

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<sup>5</sup> James 4:16a - "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."

passage is to assume that this woman's life just instantly changed after this interaction from Jesus. And I just couldn't disagree more. Certainly the *trajectory* of her life may have changed, but her interaction with Jesus would've been the beginning of a lifelong journey of learning to rebuild her life upon him.

So will part of that require her to leave this sixth guy she's with? Well yeah, ultimately it probably will. Verse 28 points to that when she leaves her water jar behind. But maybe not tomorrow. No, again whatever comfort, security and value she's been receiving from this relationship with this guy, she's going to have to first learn to receive that from Jesus before she can leave it behind, or else when the going gets tough she'll run right back or to some other addictive agent. Also, at any point she could also balk at this whole Jesus thing and turn back to her old ways; again, we're talking about someone operating out of trauma, not sound thinking.

But we must recognize that our addictions are our attempts to do away with God - to meet our god-given needs apart from God. And so the antidote is learning - often with the help of others who have gone before us - learning to trust God to meet our needs.

But finally, our goal should not be to be rid of all the addictions in our lives. As Dr Mays said, "To be alive is to be addicted, and to be alive and addicted is to stand in the need of grace." Ultimately addiction is part of the human condition. Therefore, our goal should be progress, not perfection. And this means starting to address with God the addiction that is causing the most harm and seeking progress in Him by discovering what needs it meets and exploring with others how to find and receive that living water from Him.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.