

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
4:27-30

27. And upon this his disciples came and marveled that he talked with the woman; yet no man said, What do you seek? or, Why are you talking with her? 28. The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, 29. Come, see a man who told me all things that I ever did. Is not this the Christ? 30. Then they went out of the city and came to him.

[*Upon this.*] The true idea contained in this expression seems to be, "At this point, at this critical juncture in the conversation between our Lord and the woman." What the woman would have said next after our Lord's marvelous discovery of Himself we are left to conjecture. But just as our Lord said, "I am the Messiah," the disciples returned from buying food and their appearance stopped the conversation. The woman's heart was probably too full and her mind too much excited to say more in the presence of witnesses, and especially of strangers. Therefore, no more was said and she withdrew. The soul, in the beginning of a work of grace, shrinks from discovering its workings before strangers.

[*Marveled...the woman.*] I am inclined to think that these words would have been more correctly rendered, "Talked with a woman." There is no article in the original Greek. The wonder of the disciples was excited not so much by our Lord talking to this woman, as by His talking to a woman at all. It is clear from Rabbinical writings that there was a common opinion among the Jews that both in understanding and religion women were an inferior order of beings to men. This ignorant prejudice had most likely leavened the minds of the disciples and is probably referred to in this place. Of the woman's moral character, it is not clear that the disciples could know anything at all.

Rupertus thinks that our Lord, by conversing openly with a Samaritan woman, wished to show His disciples by an example that the wall between Jews and other people was to be broken down by the Gospel, just as He taught Peter the same lesson after His ascension by the vision of the sheet full of clean and unclean beasts. (Acts x.11-15.) He thinks that the wonder of the disciples arose from the same Jewish prejudice against intercourse with uncircumcised Gentiles which appeared so strongly in after times.

Lightfoot, Schottgen, and Tholuck quote proverbial sayings from Rabbinical writers showing the Jewish feeling about women. The following are instances. "He who instructs his daughter in the law plays the fool." "Do not multiply discourses with a woman." "Let no one talk with a woman in the street, no not with his own wife." Whitby also says, from Buxtorf, that the Rabbins say that "talking with a woman is one of the six things which make a disciple impure."

[*No man said...talking with her?*] We are left to conjecture whether both

these questions apply to our Lord, or whether the first applied to the woman ("What do you seek of Him?"), and the second to our Lord ("Why are you talking with her?"). The point is of no particular importance. To me, however, it appears that both questions apply to Christ. "No man said, 'What are you seeking from her? Why are you talking with her?'"

Grotius suggests that the disciples supposed our Lord might have been seeking meat or drink from the Samaritan woman, and meant, "Why are you seeking any meat or drink from her?"

I venture to doubt whether both questions had not better have been translated alike: "What are you seeking from her? What are you talking about with her?" The Greek word is the same which our translators have rendered "what" in the first question and "why" in the second.

The expression, "No man said," seems to imply that no man ventured to ask any question about our Lord's reason for talking with the woman. It is not very clear why the sentence is introduced. The object probably is, as Cyril and Chrysostom remark, to show us the deep reverence and respect with which the disciples regarded our Lord and all His actions, even at this early period of his ministry. It also shows us that they sometimes thought things about Him to which they dared not give expression, and saw deeds of His which they could not understand but were content silently to wonder at. There is a lesson for us in their conduct. When we cannot understand the reason of our Lord's dealings with souls, let us hold our peace and try to believe that there are reasons which we shall know one day. A good servant in a great house must do his own duty and ask no questions. A young student of medicine must take many things on trust.

[*Left her waterpot.*] The Greek word here rendered "waterpot" is the same that is used in the account of the miracle at Cana in Galilee. (John ii.6.) It does not mean a small drinking vessel but a large jar, such as a woman in Eastern countries would carry on her head. We can therefore well understand that if the woman wished to return in haste to the city, she would leave her waterpot. So large a vessel could not be carried quickly, whether empty or full.

The mind of the woman in leaving her waterpot seems to me clear and unmistakable. She was entirely absorbed in the things which she had heard from our Lord's mouth. She was anxious to tell them without delay to her friends and neighbors. She therefore postponed her business of drawing water, for which she had left her house, as a matter of secondary importance, and hurried off to tell others what she had been told. The sentence is deeply instructive.

Lightfoot thinks, besides this, that the woman left her waterpot out of kindness to our Lord, "that Jesus and His disciples might have wherewithal to drink."

[*Went...city.*] The Greek word rendered "went her way," means simply, "departed" or "went." The city must of course mean "Sychar."

[*Said to the men.*] We must not suppose that the woman spoke to the men only and not to her own sex. But it is probable that the "men of the place" would be the first persons she would see, and that the women would not be in the streets but at home. Moreover, it is not unlikely that the expression is meant to show us the woman's zeal and anxiety to spread the good tidings. She did not hesitate to speak to men, though she well knew that anything a woman might say about religion was not likely to command attention.

Cyril, on this verse, remarks the power of Christ's grace. He began by bidding the woman go and "call her husband." The end of the conversation which ensued was her going and calling all the men of the city to come and see Christ.

29.--[*Come, see a man.*] The missionary spirit of the woman, in this verse, deserves special notice. Having found Christ herself, she invites others to come and be acquainted with Him. Origen calls her "the apostle of the Samaritans."

Let it be noted that her words are simple in the extreme. She enters into no argument. She only asks the men to "come and see." This, after all, is often the best way of dealing with souls. A bold invitation to come and make trial of the Gospel often produces more effect than the most elaborate arguments in support of its doctrines. Most men do not want their reason convinced so much as their will bent and their conscience aroused. A simple-minded, hearty, unlearned young disciple will often touch hearts that would hear an abstruse argument without being moved. This fact is most encouraging to all believers who try to do good. All cannot argue; but all believers may say, "Come and see Christ. If you would only look at Him and see Him, you would soon believe."

Barradius remarks what a practical illustration the woman affords of one of the concluding sentences of Revelation: "Let him who hears, say 'Come!'" (Rev. xxii.17.) The Samaritan woman, having heard, said "Come," and the result was that many souls came and took the water of life freely.

Cyril remarks the difference between the woman's conduct and that of the servant who buried his talent in the ground. She received the talent of the good tidings of the Gospel and at once put it out at interest.

Chrysostom remarks the wisdom of the woman. "She did not say, Come, *believe*; but Come, *see*: a gentler expression than the other, and one which more attracted them."

[*Told me all things that I ever did.*] These words must be taken with some qualifications. Of course they cannot mean that our Lord had literally told the woman "all things that she ever did in her life." This would have been physically impossible in the space of a single afternoon. The probable meaning is, "He has told me all the principal sins that I have committed. He has shown a perfect knowledge of the chief events of my life. He has shown such thorough acquaintance with my history that I doubt

not He could have told me anything I ever did."

Some allowance must probably be made for the warm and excited feelings of the woman when she spoke these words. She used hyperbolic and extravagant language under the influence of these feelings which she would probably not have used in a calm state of mind, and which we must therefore not judge too strictly. Moreover, as Poole remarks, it admits of doubt whether our Lord may not have spoken of other things in the conversation which St. John has not been inspired to record.

Let it be noted that the Samaritan woman, in saying that "our Lord had told her all things she had ever done," very probably referred to the common opinion about Messiah's omniscience. The Rabbinical writers, according to Lightfoot, specially applied to Messiah the words of Isaiah: "He shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by the sight of his eyes." (Isa. xi.3.) Her words, therefore, were a well-known argument that our Lord must be the Christ, and her object in using them would be thoroughly understood.

[*Is not this the Christ?*] The Greek words so rendered would be translated with equal correctness, "Is this the Christ? Can this be the Christ?" A similar form of interrogative sentence is found in thirteen other places in the New Testament. In twelve of them the interrogative is used without "not": viz., Matt. vii.16; xxvi.22,25; Mark iv.21; xiv.9; Luke vi.39; John vii.31; viii.22; xviii.35; Acts x.47; 2 Cor. i.17; James iii.11. In only one place is the interrogative used with "not": Matt. xii.23. I am inclined, on the whole, to think that "not" would have been better omitted in the sentence before us. Euthymius takes this view.

The value of questions, if we want to do good to souls, is well illustrated in this verse. A question often sets working a mind which would be utterly unmoved by an affirmation. It drives the mind to exertion, and by a gentle compulsion arouses it to think. Men are far less able to go to sleep under religious teaching when they are invited to answer a question. The number of questions in the New Testament is a striking and instructive fact. Had the woman said, "This is the Christ!" she might have excited prejudice and dislike. By asking, "Is this the Christ?" she got the men to inquire and judge for themselves.

30.--[*Then they went out of the city.*] This sentence is full of encouragement to all who try to do good to souls. The words of one single woman were the means of arousing a whole city to go forth and inquire about Christ. We must never despise the smallest and meanest efforts. We never know to what the least beginnings may grow. The grain of mustard seed at Sychar was the word of a feeble woman: "Come and see."

Specially we ought to observe the encouragement the verse affords to the efforts of women. A woman may be the means, under God, of founding a Church. The first person baptized by Paul in Europe was not a man but a woman, Lydia, the seller of purple. Let women never suppose that men only can do good. Women also, in their way, can evangelize as really and truly

as men. Every believing woman who has a tongue can speak to others about Christ. The Samaritan woman was far less learned than Nicodemus. But she was far bolder and so did far more good.

[*And came to Him.*] Perhaps the sentence would be more literally rendered "were coming" or "began to come to Him." It was while they were coming that the conversation which immediately follows, between Christ and His disciples, took place, and perhaps it was the sight of the crowd coming which made our Lord say some of the things that He did.

Calvin remarks on this part of the woman's history, that some may think her blameable in that "while she is still ignorant and imperfectly taught, she goes beyond the limits of her faith. I reply that she would have acted inconsiderately if she had assumed the office of a teacher; but when she desires nothing more than to excite her fellow-citizens to hear Christ speaking, we will not say that she forgot herself or proceeded further than she had a right to do. She merely does the office of a trumpet or a bell, to invite others to come to Christ."

The concluding verse shows us most forcibly that ministers and teachers of religion ought never to be above taking pains and trouble with a single soul. A conversation with one person was the means of leading a whole city to come and hear Christ and resulted in the salvation of many souls.

Cornelius à Lapide, at this point of his commentary, gravely informs us that the name of the Samaritan woman was Photina; that after her conversion she preached the Gospel at Carthage, and that she suffered martyrdom there on the 20th of March, on which day the Romish Martyrology makes special mention of her name! He also tells us that her head is kept as a relic at Rome in the Basilica of St. Paul, and that it was actually shown to him there! It is well to know what ridiculous and lying legends the Church of Rome palms off upon Roman Catholics as truths while she withholds from them the Bible!