



Chapter 3

Jesus Confirms Our Dignity

John 4:1-42

UNDERSTANDING

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read John 4:1-42

The Big Picture

Some of the ways in which many women experience the effects of original sin are through discrimination on one hand and disordered attachments on the other. Jesus brings hope to these situations and shows us a radically different attitude.

In the last chapter we learned about the Fall of Adam and Eve, and how their sin ushered tensions and misunderstandings into the relationships between men and women. Throughout history, women have been particularly affected by this great disruption of God's original plan in the form of discrimination. Commenting on a particular scene in Jesus' life when He encounters a woman about to be stoned for adultery, Pope John Paul II points out that it represents "the concrete and historical situation of women, a situation which is weighed down by the inheritance of sin. One of the ways in which this inheritance is expressed is habitual discrimination against women in favor of men."⁸

Perhaps the last chapter (and your own experience) left you feeling discouraged and hopeless about the possibility of overcoming the

problem of “lust and domination.” If so, read on, because there is certainly hope!

Jesus, the Restorer

Even in the midst of our disobedience, God does not abandon us. Instead, He Himself becomes our Savior in the person of Jesus Christ. The remarkable thing is that He came not only to restore our relationship with Him, but also our relationships with one another. Jesus’ triumph over Satan was accomplished not only in His death on the cross but in His daily interactions with those around Him, and the example these interactions give us for honoring the dignity of others. Jesus’ own life shows us specifically “what the reality of Redemption means for the dignity and vocation of women.”⁹

Jesus, the Radical

During His lifetime, Jesus caused quite a stir by the way He treated women. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II meditates on Jesus’ interaction with women during His time on earth:

It is universally admitted—even by people with a critical attitude towards the Christian message—that in the eyes of his contemporaries Christ became a promoter of women’s true dignity and of the vocation corresponding to this dignity. At times this caused wonder, surprise, often to the point of scandal: ‘They marveled that he was talking with a woman’ (John 4:27), because this behavior differed from that of his contemporaries.”¹⁰

⁹Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD) (Rome: Vatican, 1988), 14.

⁹*Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

In fact, John Paul II goes on to say,

Christ's way of acting, the Gospel of his words and deeds, is a consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women. Consequently, the women who are close to Christ discover themselves in the truth which he "teaches" and "does", even when this truth concerns their "sinfulness". They feel "liberated" by this truth, restored to themselves: they feel loved with "eternal love", with a love which finds direct expression in Christ himself."¹¹

Contrary to the discrimination against women prevalent during His day, Jesus' revolutionary words and actions always expressed the "respect and honor due to women."¹² In fact, John Paul II describes some of the women in the Gospels as "guardians of the Gospel message," as it is with them that Jesus' "conversation concerns the most profound truths of revelation and faith."¹³

Jesus, the Messiah (John 4:1–42)

Not only is Jesus speaking to a woman—something strange enough that even His disciples question Him about it—but also a Samaritan, with whom Jews did not interact. Moreover, they don't have just a casual exchange: Jesus discusses truths that reach to the core of both her life and faith and His own mission on earth.

Having had five husbands (and the current one who is not a husband), the woman has been on a search for love—presumably having used or having been used by some of these men, looking to them to satisfy a thirst that only God can quench. Jesus knows her sins, but He also

¹¹*Ibid.*, 15 (emphasis in the original).

¹²*Ibid.*, 13.

¹³*Ibid.*, 15.

knows her dignity and potential for holiness. John Paul II says,

Christ is the one who “knows what is in man” (cf. Jn 2:25)—in man and woman. He knows the *dignity of man*, his worth in God’s eyes. He himself, the Christ, is the definitive confirmation of this worth.... Jesus’ attitude to the women whom He meets in the course of his Messianic service reflects the eternal plan of God, who, in creating each one of them, chooses her and loves her in Christ (cf. Eph 1:1-5).... *Each of them from the “beginning” inherits as a woman the dignity of personhood.* Jesus of Nazareth confirms this dignity, recalls it, renews it, and makes it a part of the Gospel and of the Redemption for which he is sent into the world.¹⁴

Application to Jesus

During His public ministry, Jesus reveals to women some of the most profound truths about His identity and mission.

After recalling her sin, Jesus does not leave the woman without hope, instead revealing to her the cure for her wound: Himself. He says, “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). Finally, Jesus reveals to her the answer to the mystery of His identity: He is the Messiah, the one for whom she has been waiting. She, a woman, is the first person in this Gospel with whom Jesus shares this revelation! She is then given the privilege of being the catalyst for the conversion of her village.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 13 (emphasis in the original).

John Paul II explains that Jesus' attitude in the Gospels "confirms and clarifies, in the Holy Spirit, the truth about the equality of man and woman. One must speak of an essential 'equality,' since both of them—the woman as much as the man—are created in the image and likeness of God. Both of them are equally capable of receiving the outpouring of divine truth and love in the Holy Spirit. Both receive his salvific and sanctifying 'visits.'"¹⁵

Jesus brings redemption to the tensions that exist within men and women's relationships. His encounters with women all give witness to a woman's true dignity. As an answer to men's inclination to dominate, Jesus shows that women are created with an equal dignity and deserve equal treatment and respect. In response to a woman's tendency to have a disordered desire for a man, Jesus teaches that relationships with men will not totally fulfill us. Even within the best of relationships, both men and women will still be thirsting for something deeper. God is the only one who will quench that thirst.

Application to Our Lives

Jesus desires to speak to us, too, to the depths of our soul and life. Are we afraid of this conversation?

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 16.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

John 4:1-42

STEP 1: OPENER

Can you think of a couple whose relationship you really admire? What is it about that relationship that inspires you?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

Though our first parents, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God and, through their disobedience, caused discord and selfishness to enter into relationships between men and women, God, in His goodness, did not abandon us. Instead, He became human to redeem us and restore order to these relationships. In this chapter, we will look at Jesus' interactions with women in the Gospels to see how He witnesses to our dignity and shows us our true path to happiness.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Read John 4:1-42.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

Exploration: Questions and Answers

Read John 4:1-42

1. Why might this Gospel story be a story of hope for women (and men)?

Allow the group to discuss. See the “Jesus, the Radical” section in “What do I need to know about this passage?” for ideas.

2. How do Jesus’ actions illustrate the point that all persons, men and women alike, are created with equal dignity?

Jesus does not shy away from speaking with a woman, even when His disciples “marveled” at it. He has a discussion with her about incredibly profound topics of faith, topics that were probably discussed only among men in those days. God also chooses her to be the catalyst for the conversion of her village.

3. Why do you think Jesus asks the woman to call her husband?

Allow the group to discuss. This question allows Jesus to speak to a part of her soul that is hurting. Through this question she admits the fact that she has had six “husbands.” She has been on a search for love, looking to different men to satisfy a longing in her soul.

4. What is the cure Jesus gives her for her unending search for love?

Jesus. Only God can truly quench the thirst in our souls for love and communion.

5. With regard to your relationships with men, what still needs redemption? In what way does evil need to be defeated there?

Allow the group to discuss.

6. Either in your own life or your experiences with others, can you relate to the woman at the well—someone who looks to another person to make her happy and satisfied?

Allow the group to discuss.

7. What else are you tempted to use to try and satisfy the longings in your soul?

Allow the group to discuss.

8. John Paul II describes several women in the Gospels as “guardians of the Gospel message” as their conversations with Jesus “concern the most profound truths of revelation and faith.”¹⁶ What are the truths that He entrusts to the woman in this story?

Allow the group to discuss. Some suggestions: He satisfies the thirst in our soul for love; He knows us and our struggles intimately; He is the Messiah who “will show us all things” (Jn 1:26).

¹⁶*ibid.*, 15.

9. Why do you think Jesus chose to reveal His identity to this woman?

Allow the group to discuss.

10. What message or knowledge has Christ entrusted to you recently? Perhaps it's a lesson He's taught you through an experience, or something He's spoken to you about in prayer.

Allow the group to discuss.

11. What do you need to do to make yourself more receptive to divine truths?

Allow the group to discuss.

NOTES
