

Changing the Subject

John 4:20-26

We studied last Sunday night an amazing evangelistic encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. And you ought to remember this, about Jesus' method of evangelism, his method of speaking words of eternal life. He doesn't follow the pattern of our age, but rather contradicts it. Right at the outset, right as he engages this woman in a conversation about spiritual things, right as he tells her that he is the living water and that "whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst," right after he tells her that "the water that I [give] will become...a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life," and right after she says to Jesus, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw," Jesus does something absolutely astounding.

Instead of immediately proclaiming salvation to her, he sets her back. He reveals her sin, the awful, humiliating depth of her sin.

v.16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here."

Of course, he knew she didn't have a husband. Indeed, he exposes her sin quite specifically, by saying to her,

v.18 "You have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband."

So, instead of closing the sale, as we say today in the business-world language of so much evangelism, Jesus puts everything in jeopardy. By dealing with the issue of sin.

There is nothing that will make people more uncomfortable, more defensive, more quickly, than exposing their sin. And this

woman certainly became uncomfortable, so much so that she changes the subject. No longer wanting to pursue the conversation as Jesus has directed it, she brings up a standard question for debate, apparently wanting to hide behind that theological debate so she won't have to talk about her sin. The question is,

v.20

One commentator writes this, "Seeing herself all revealed, does she now break down and ask what hopes there might be for one so guilty? No, her convictions have not reached that point yet. She ingeniously shifts the subject from a personal to a public question. It is not, "Alas, what a wicked life am I leading!" but "Lo, what a wonderful prophet I got into conversation with! He will be able to settle that interminable dispute between us and the Jews. Sir, you must know all about such matters — our fathers hold to this mountain here," pointing to Gerizim in Samaria, "as the divinely consecrated place of worship, but ye Jews say that Jerusalem is the proper place — which of us is right?" How slowly does the human heart submit to thorough humiliation!"

Another commentator simply writes, "Nothing is more common than for sinners to make an attempt to change the subject in order to avoid painful reminders of sinful conduct."

It was a controversial topic. One which was vigorously debated. The place of worship. There was bitter division between the Jews and the Samaritans on this issue, along with many others. The Samaritans seemed to uphold only the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, and in them, the worship on the mountain to which the woman referred, Mt. Gerizim, does seem to have prominence. Indeed, the "fathers" Abraham and Jacob built altars in that region, and Mt. Gerizim was the scene of the great blessing of the people.

Deut. 11:29 “Now it shall be, when the LORD your God has brought you into the land which you go to possess, that you shall put the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal.”

And in Deut. 27, the Samaritans found instructions to build an altar on that mountain of blessing, Mt. Gerizim. And disregarding the later instructions when the people of Israel finally settled in their land and established the capital and the permanent temple at Jerusalem, the Samaritans believed that Gerizim remained the only appropriate place for the temple to be built. They believed that it was the only lawful place for the worship of God’s people to take place.

Jesus answered her question, though he absolutely refused to enter into the foolish controversy about which mountain. Instead, he raises the issue to a whole other plane. His response shows that the argument about the place of worship is no longer relevant. It’s a moot point. Because with the arrival of the New Covenant, with the arrival of Jesus in the flesh, the place of worship is no longer the issue.

I. WORSHIP NO LONGER FOCUSES UPON AN EXTERNAL PLACE.

Instead, in Jesus’ answer to this woman, he explains that WHERE one worships doesn’t matter. Rather, the attitude of heart and mind and the obedience to God’s truth regarding the object and method of worship is what matters. It is not the “where” but the “how” and the “what” that is all-important.

And so he says, in that debate, if the debate continues at all, that both sides are wrong.

v.21

Now, I should comment, that Jesus is not merely rebuking the

woman for asking this controversial question in an attempt to escape having to deal with her own sinfulness. His answer is not a rebuke, as were the sharp answers he would frequently give to the questions of the Pharisees. He doesn’t call her a whitewashed tomb. Nor the language with which he rebuked those Pharisees, “Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?”

This woman gets a gentle response from Jesus, even in rebuke. A gentle response that reveals, perhaps, that though she is uncomfortable and has sought to change the subject, still there is humility and grief because of her sin. With Jesus continuing to speak to her words of life, we can assume some degree of sincerity in her questioning! In fact, some commentators, including John Calvin, give this woman a great benefit of the doubt.

Calvin says this, “Some have mistaken idea that the woman finds the rebukes disagreeable and hateful and cunningly changes the conversation. On the contrary, she passes from the particular to the general, and having been informed about her sin wants to be taught generally about the pure worship of God.”

I think that gives her a bit too much benefit of the doubt, but clearly there is some level of continuing interest and humility, otherwise Jesus’ would have dismissed her as he did the Pharisees. He doesn’t. Instead, he gives her a full and clear revelation of himself as the divine Messiah who would be the savior of the world.

To do that, he has to correct her misunderstanding about worship. Worship no longer focuses upon an external place.

v.21

Now, in the Old Covenant, it did. Worship did focus upon the external place.

A. Old Covenant worship required an external place to demonstrate God's presence among his people Israel.

Both the Jews and the Samaritans were right, in the Old Covenant, to put high value upon the place! It was the emphasis that God had given his people.

Deut. 12:5 "But you shall seek the place where the LORD your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go. 6 "There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks."

Continuing on to speak about the promised land, God says,

Deut. 12:11 "There will be the place where the LORD your God chooses to make His name abide. There you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, and all your choice offerings which you vow to the LORD...13 Take heed to yourself that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every place that you see; 14 but in the place which the LORD chooses, in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I command you...18 [Y]ou must eat them before the LORD your God in the place which the LORD your God chooses."

Why such emphasis upon the place? Because that place, that external place, that temple was the visible demonstration of God's presence among his people Israel. And the whole point of Jesus' answer to this woman's question is to teach her that the times have changed. The external shadows of the Old Covenant are

passing away. The outward, external symbols and types of the Old Covenant ceremonial system are ending. And not that they were wrong or lacking any usefulness. Rather, they all pointed to Christ, and so with the coming of Christ, the external forms pass away and the inward realities symbolized by those external forms become prominent.

Let me prove that to you with the words of Scripture. Turn with me to,

Heb.8:1 "Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, 2 a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man. 3 For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. Therefore it is necessary that this One also have something to offer. 4 For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; 5 who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." 6 But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises."

Heb.9:7 "But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance; 8 the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. 9 It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience-- 10 concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation. 11 But Christ came as High

Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.”

And so in the New Covenant, in Jesus’ blood, worship no longer focuses upon an external place, for God is everywhere and his people are everywhere. God’s people are no longer restricted to one nation, and therefore the place of worship is no longer restricted to that one nation. In a very direct and obvious sense,

B. New Covenant worship emphasizes God’s presence among his people of all the nations.

And so we read things like,

1 TIm.2:8 “I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.”

Everywhere. “In every place.”

Also,

2 Cor.2:14 “Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.”

And,

1 Cor.1:2 “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.”

The place of worship is everywhere. Men are to worship in every place, in every nation.

Therefore that temple, that PLACE of his presence where we come to worship, is not defined by an external locality. Instead, Jesus tells this Samaritan woman, neither of those external places have any significance any more!

v.21

So what does matter? What is the internal reality of worship? Jesus gives us his answer.

v.24

Worship must be offered in spirit and in truth. Let’s look at truth first.

II. WORSHIP MUST BE OFFERED IN TRUTH.

What does that mean? First and foremost, I believe, it means that there must be clear and definite knowledge of God derived from his special revelation. In other words, to worship God, you must know God. And you must know him truthfully. You must know the truth about God. To offer worship,

A. We must know God according to his revealed truth.

And here Jesus offers a strong rebuke to the woman, for her ignorance of God. It is an ignorance, however, that he will personally do away with, by teaching her about God by teaching her about himself.

But the whole problem with her original question is that she, among the Samaritans, didn’t know God. They were separated from God.

v.22

That rebuke must be leveled against many people today, and many churches, who pretend to offer worship to a god whom they pretend to know. But they don’t. Because they form an image of

god in their own mind, and worship that image. People typically tend to worship a god they have fashioned according to their own knowledge, their own inadequate knowledge.

Let me give you a couple biblical examples.

Rom.1:21 "Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man--and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things."

Or,

Acts 17:22 Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; 23 "for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: 24 "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. 25 "Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.

And,

1 Cor.8:5 "For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live."

There is one God. One true God. He is the God who is revealed in Scripture, the God who reveals himself as a trinity, and all others are a false God.

There are all sorts of bizarre false gods in our day, from the pantheistic foolishness of the new age movement to the ignorance of the doomsday cults to the self-indulgent followers of the gods of personal pleasure and physical enjoyment. If you ever speak about "your god," and you are not defining him according to the Bible, then you are speaking of a false god!

And to know God, you must know Jesus Christ. To know God according to his revealed truth, and to worship God in truth, you must know Jesus. For he says of himself,

John 14:6 "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

Jesus says, "I am the truth." True worshippers must worship in truth. We must worship the one true God, worshiping him with true knowledge of his identity.

And right at this point, we see how Jesus reveals himself very fully to this woman, and therefore implies that she is listening carefully, and ready to believe. For surely, Jesus would not have offered this revelation of truth to one who was hardened against him. To that extent, we can give this Samaritan woman the benefit of the doubt. And realize that she was learning about the true God from one who was God in the flesh. It was a startling statement, a bold declaration that Jesus spoke to her.

v.25-26

The woman correctly understood from the scriptures of the OT that a messiah would come. And she correctly asserts that he would reveal the truth to her. And Jesus agrees with her. Then declares to her, "I am he." Or, strictly literal, "I am."

He is the truth.

But there is another aspect of worshiping in truth, and that is that,

B. We must worship God according to his revealed truth.

In other words, the where of worship isn't what matters, the place. What does matter, though, is the "How." And here is where many Christians have fallen to all sorts of sub-biblical and unbiblical patterns of worship.

The Old Covenant shadows have passed away, in their external forms. The gifts and sacrifices of the Old Covenant are, as I read earlier from Hebrews 9, "concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation."

But the principles still apply, the principles of worship still apply. And the most basic of those principles is that we must worship God according to his commands, according to his regulations and prescriptions. We are not free to offer whatever sacrifices of worship we might choose, but must, rather, offer only those which he has declared to be true.

It's not the place that matters any more, for there are no New Covenant prescriptions the place that apply anymore. In fact, those regulations regarding the location of temples built with human hands are done away with.

Acts 7: 44 "Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen, 45 "which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David, 46 "who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob. 47 "But

Solomon built Him a house. 48 "However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: 49 `Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the LORD, Or what is the place of My rest? 50 Has My hand not made all these things?"

So it's not the where of worship that God prescribes, but the "what." The sacrifices are still prescribed. He tells us what we are to do in worship, and so, when it comes worship, the principle so clearly applied in Deuteronomy 12 still applies.

Deut.12:32 "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it."

And so, we read in the NT of severe rebuke to all matters of what is literally "will-worship," worship that is determined by the judgment of our own will and not by the regulation of Scripture. The context is a rebuke to those who add outward and physical restrictions upon our lives, beyond those given to us in the Bible.

Col. 2:23 "These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh."

Self-imposed religion. Will-worship, as it would literally translate. John Calvin writes this in his Institutes, "In regard in the first, we should consider that we have to do with God, whom our obedience so delights, that he abominates all will — worship, how specious and splendid soever it be in the eyes of men. If all will-worship, which we devise without authority, is abomination to God, it follows that no worship can be acceptable to him save that which is approved by his word."

We must worship God according to his revealed truth. We are

not free to invent new elements of worship in order to attract the young people of our day. We are not free to turn the solemnity and reverence of worship into a three ringed circus. We are not free to transform the elements of worship given to us in the Bible into elements of entertainment for our benefit and enjoyment.

What we do in worship is prescribed by God. We pray. We sing. We speak promises and oaths. We read and listen to Scripture. We give attention to biblical preaching. We offer our tithes. And we celebrate the sacraments. And that's about it. Those are the things which define truth in worship.

That, of course, labels us as traditional, which in many places, is the kiss of death when it comes to church growth. I believe that many people are beginning to realize the emptiness of worldly worship, and I expect that they will realize it all the more in the years to come. And people will long for the simplicity of worship that is offered to God in truth.

Let me assure you, there is great wonder, great delight in offering those simple, reverent, and biblical sacrifices as the outward expression of the inward desires of your heart. And with that, let me emphasize,

III. WORSHIP MUST BE OFFERED IN SPIRIT.

There is some debate as to whether that means the human spirit or the Holy Spirit, and I want to say first of all that it would apply to your spirit. To worship in spirit, is to offer your worship in your spirit. To offer your worship not merely in external forms, however good those forms may be, but to offer your sacrifices as the sincere and genuine expression of your heart.

A. We must worship God with the internal, spiritual actions of our hearts.

That's what defines true worshipers! They are those whom

the father seeks to be his worshipers, those in whom he is most fully glorified, they who worship in spirit, not merely in outward ceremonies.

v.23-24

Now, I ought to say this, some of those outward ceremonies are very good. I hope that our outward ceremonies are good. That is, I hope that they are biblical, and if they are not, then we ought to change them. I give attention to outward ceremonies, even obvious things like the pulpit in the center of the sanctuary, emphasizing the preaching of the word. The value of standing out of respect for the reading of God's word. And the bowing of heads for prayer. I would also support and encourage kneeling, which is certainly a biblical position for prayer. Sometimes we read prayers in unison, or a form of a doctrinal creed. Or a responsive reading. When I serve the Lord's Supper, I stand behind the table, not in front of it, standing between you and the Lord as a priest.

All those are outward things. And I could get more specific. We write checks or put cash into an offering plate. That's an outward thing. And we sing. We sing words with our voices, and some of you might think that your outward worship in that singing isn't very pleasing. And outwardly, I suppose, maybe it isn't. But that isn't the point. The point of worship is not the size of the check that you write. It's the spirit of the heart that writes it. The point of worship is not the quality of your singing voice, it's the spirit of your heart that motivates the singing.

David understood that so well, even in the Old Covenant. There is no greater example of this call to worship in spirit than the prayer of repentance he offered in,

Psalm 51:16 "For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would

give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart--These, O God, You will not despise.”

Worship that is acceptable to God is offering to God the sacrifices he has prescribed, and doing so from the depth of your heart. “True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.”

But one more thing, about worshiping in spirit. Notice,
v.24
“God is spirit.”

That is to say, God does not have a body. Now Jesus, the son of God, the second person of the trinity, did take to himself a human form, and lived among us. But he was God before the incarnation, and the very nature of God is spiritual. The very essence of God is that he is non-physical. He is spirit.

And so we must worship him as spirit.

B. We must worship God according to his nature as spirit.

That means, above all else, that we must not worship with any reference to any visual image of God. That is clear as it can be in the second commandment.

Ex. 20:2 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. 3 You shall have no other gods before Me. 4 You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; 5 you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.”

We ought not to have statues as the object of our worship. We ought not to have visual images of God as the object of our worship. We ought not to offer our worship in the context of any graven images, for God is spirit. And his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth.

We must come to God on a spiritual level, and never is that more plain than in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, for there, by faith, we feed upon Christ’s body and drink his blood. But not physically. Not in the flesh. But in spirit.

And it is real! It really happens. And the communion we have with Christ really takes place. And we use outward elements, but the communion, the fellowship, is spiritual.

That’s why the place doesn’t matter. That’s why the ceremonial regulations of the Old Covenant are done away with. They all have to do with outward things. True worship, genuine worship, godly, biblical worship, occurs when you offer to God the sacrifices of worship he has defined in the Bible, and you do it as the outward expression of the sincerity of your heart.

That’s what we have come to do this morning, to worship him in spirit and in truth.

Ps. 95:6 “Oh come, let us worship and bow down; Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. 7 For He is our God, And we are the people of His pasture, And the sheep of His hand.”

Ps.96:1 “Oh, sing to the LORD a new song! Sing to the LORD, all the earth. 2 Sing to the LORD, bless His name; Proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day. 3 Declare His glory among the nations, His wonders among all peoples. 4 For the LORD is great and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above

all gods. 5 For all the gods of the peoples are idols, But the LORD made the heavens. 6 Honor and majesty are before Him; Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary. 7 Give to the LORD, O families of the peoples, Give to the LORD glory and strength. 8 Give to the LORD the glory due His name; Bring an offering, and come into His courts. 9 Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness! Tremble before Him, all the earth.”