

John 4:6–30 (NIV)

⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

⁷When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

¹¹"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?" ¹²Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

¹³Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

¹⁷"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

¹⁹"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

²¹"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

²⁵The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

²⁶Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he."

²⁷Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

²⁸Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ²⁹"Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" ³⁰They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

God did the undignified thing: he died on a cross.

Are we willing to give up our own dignity?

There's a small moment in Scripture that is easily missed, though it says so much.

David has been made king of Israel. He has conquered Jerusalem and, most recently, defeated the Philistines and brought the Ark of the Covenant to his new capital. As they bring the Ark into Jerusalem, David is so overjoyed that he dances and sings, nearly in a frenzy. Basically, he makes a fool of himself in his joy. And his estranged wife, Michal, tells him so. But David tells her:

"I will celebrate before the LORD. I will become even more undignified than this and I will be humiliated in my own eyes" (2 Samuel 6:22).

Undignified. Humiliated. Embarrassed. You put the words to it. David has no interest in what those around him are thinking, what sort of spectacle he is making of himself. He seeks only to express his joy and his praise of the LORD God Almighty.

The question to us is obvious: Would we become undignified, even humiliated, for the sake of our Lord? Are we more concerned with what others say than what Jesus says? I'm reminded of what Paul wrote about the humiliation of Jesus (from Philippians 2):

⁵In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own
advantage;

⁷rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Undignified. Humiliated. Jesus suffered the ultimate indignity, for there was no greater humiliation in the Roman Empire than to be crucified. Yet, too often, we tightly cling to our sense of propriety, worrying too much about what others would say. To our shame, Christians have often turned away from the undignified, the outcasts, the odd ones, the strangers. Jesus once met such a woman, but he refused to turn away or turn aside. Indeed, it seems as if Jesus came looking for her.

A Samaritan woman

In the fourth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus is making his way back to Galilee from Jerusalem. He has chosen the route that will take him through the land of the Samaritans, who were generally hated and despised by Jesus' fellow Jews (see the accompanying text box).

When Jesus came to the town of Sychar, he sat down to rest and refresh by the town's well. It is mid-day, so no one is there. Women came to fetch water in the cool of the early morning or the evening. After a few minutes, a woman comes to the well to fetch water and Jesus strikes up a conversation. We quickly see that there is something very wrong in what is happening. N. T. Wright elaborates on this:

For a start, Jesus was known already as a holy man, leading a movement to bring Israel back to God. (John's readers know that he is more than that, but we must learn to think with the minds of his followers at the time.) In that culture, many devout Jewish men would not have allowed themselves to be alone with a woman. If it was unavoidable that they should be, they would certainly not have entered into conversation with her. The risk, they would have thought, was too high—risk of impurity, risk of gossip, risk ultimately of being drawn into immorality. And yet Jesus is talking to this woman. Later in the chapter John shows how startled the disciples were by this (4:27).

Second, the woman is of course a Samaritan. Ever since some of the Jewish exiles had come back from Babylon, to find that the central section of their ancient territory was occupied by a group who claimed to be the true descendants of Abraham, and who opposed their return, there had been constant trouble. Sometimes it had broken out into actual skirmishes, with bloodshed and murder. But mostly it was simply a matter of not mixing. The Jews wouldn't have anything to do with the Samaritans. They would, especially, not share eating and drinking vessels with them. And yet Jesus is asking this woman for a drink.

Third, compounding both of these problems, the woman is obviously a bad character. The normal time for women to visit the well, set as it was at some distance from the town, would be at a cooler time of day, most likely first thing in the morning or late in the afternoon. This woman has come at the time when she is least likely to meet anyone—at least, anyone who knows her, her past and her immoral lifestyle. The last thing she would want would be to rub shoulders with the other women of the town, and they would feel the same about her. Jesus will presently show that he knows all about this. And yet he engages her in conversation—conversation with a teasing, double-meaning flavor to it.¹

Jesus tells the woman her secrets. He offers her the living water – himself. He isn't worried about the propriety of talking with a woman or the indignity of a Jew engaging a Samaritan. Rather, he sees a woman in deep need and he offers her rescue.

When his disciples catch up to Jesus, they can't believe that he has lowered himself to speak with this sort of woman. It is beyond the pale. It is improper, offensive, and undignified.

How does Jesus respond to his disciples' dismay? He not only stays, he stays for several days, surrounding himself with lots and lots of Samaritans. It is like he immerses himself in a giant pool of indignity.

Why? Because they need him. They need the living water every bit as much as the woman at the well. They are parched and only Jesus can truly slake their thirst. Jesus elevates compassion over humiliation. And he would become far more undignified yet, on a hill called Golgotha.

The questions are simple:

Are we willing to become undignified and to embrace the undignified for our Lord?

The Samaritans

(from the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*)

The name "Samaritans" originally was identified with the Israelites of the Northern Kingdom (2 Kings 17:29). When the Assyrians conquered Israel and exiled 27,290 Israelites, a "remnant of Israel" remained in the land. Assyrian captives from distant places also settled there (2 Kings 17:24). This led to the intermarriage of some, though not all, Jews with Gentiles and to widespread worship of foreign gods. By the time the Jews returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the walls of Jerusalem, Ezra and Nehemiah refused to let the Samaritans share in the experience (Ezra 4:1–3; Neh. 4:7). The old antagonism between Israel to the north and Judah to the south intensified the quarrel.

The Jewish inhabitants of Samaria identified Mount Gerizim as the chosen place of God and the only center of worship, calling it the "navel of the earth" because of a tradition that Adam sacrificed there. Their Scriptures were limited to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Moses was regarded as the only prophet and intercessor in the final judgment. They also believed that 6,000 years after creation, a Restorer would arise and would live on earth for 110 years. On the judgment day the righteous would be resurrected in paradise and the wicked roasted in eternal fire.

In the days of Christ, the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans was greatly strained (Luke 9:52–54; 10:25–37; 17:11–19; John 8:48). The animosity was so great that the Jews bypassed Samaria as they traveled between Galilee and Judea. They went an extra distance through the barren land of Perea on the eastern side of the Jordan to avoid going through Samaria. Yet Jesus rebuked His disciples for their hostility to the Samaritans (Luke 9:55–56), healed a Samaritan leper (Luke 17:16), honored a Samaritan for his neighborliness (Luke 10:30–37), praised a Samaritan for his gratitude (Luke 17:11–18), asked a drink of a Samaritan woman (John 4:7), and preached to the Samaritans (John 4:40–42). Then in Acts 1:8 Jesus challenged His disciples to witness in Samaria. Philip, a deacon, opened a mission in Samaria (Acts 8:5).

¹ Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10* (40–41). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

To be undignified for God means to live unashamedly for the glory of God. It is not more complicated than that. More than a decade ago, Hugh Hewitt wrote a book titled *The Embarrassed Believer*, asking simply this: “What does it mean to be ashamed of the Gospel?”

- Have you ever felt embarrassed about your faith? Have you ever been made to feel like you ought to keep the gospel to yourself?
- Have you ever felt embarrassed by other Christians? If so, how? What embarrassed you? Was it something they said or did? Or was it simply something about *them*?
- David was willing to be undignified for God in his celebration? Are you ever undignified in your praise and love of God? Do you think anyone ever thinks that, as a Christian, you are a bit odd?
- What are some of the ways in which our calling to be a disciple *ought* to be odd or undignified in the eyes of the world?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, 2 Samuel 5:1-16 David is made king of all Israel and conquers Jerusalem.	Tuesday, 2 Samuel 5:17-25 David defeats the Philistines.
Wednesday, 2 Samuel 6 David brings the Ark to Jerusalem.	Thursday, Luke 17:11-18 Jesus heals a Samaritan leper.
Friday, Luke 10:25-37 Jesus tells a parable about a good Samaritan.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle’s Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands in its own.
 This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.
 On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying the Gospel of John

Meet from 11:45 to 1:00 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Revelation

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott’s Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to “worship” and then “sermons.” You’ll find the study with each week’s recorded sermon.

There is also an archive of nearly 500 studies at www.scottengle.org