
LIFE IN HIS NAME

GATHERING FRUIT FOR ETERNAL LIFE

John 4:27-42

We will be in verses 27 to 42 of John Chapter 4 as we continue our study through the book of John. Let's pray. Lord, as we open the scripture, we ask now for the help of your Holy Spirit. May we respond with understanding and with faith. Help us, Lord, we pray. Help me to speak now your truth, in Jesus' name. Amen.

John Chapter 4, verses 27 to 42 - Gathering Fruit for Eternal Life:

Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you seek?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" They went out of the town and were coming to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. 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."

Gathering Fruit for Eternal Life -- We have here a passage of scripture that talks about the subject of evangelism. Jesus uses the image of harvesting here, and that's a little bit of a challenging subject. If you are a follower of Christ, you may feel that you don't do this very well. A lot of times guilt is associated with this particular subject for those who follow Christ.

If you are not a Christian, you may very well find the idea even offensive. The very thought that someone else is trying to convert you - if it's not understood, it can feel like your values, your personhood is not respected. It's a challenging subject, but it's a subject that is clearly, clearly biblical. And once we understand it, I think we will be able to think differently about it.

We looked last week at the first part of this chapter. Jesus is traveling with his disciples from Jerusalem in the south up to Galilee in the north. They have to go through Samaria. The Samaritans and the Jews hate one another. There is an extreme racial divide between these two groups. The disciples are moving through and Jesus encounters this woman at Jacob's well. The disciples go into town to get food for Jesus, and while they are in town Jesus has this encounter with this woman.

He talks with her about the subject of worship, and through this experience she is brought into a relationship with Jesus Christ. She is, in our language and in biblical language, saved. She becomes a follower of Christ. She becomes a Christian. She goes back into town. This is a woman who would not have been respected in her town. She has gone through a series of broken relationships. She has been married five times in a day when that was extremely frowned upon and unusual, and she was living with a man who wasn't her husband. She had no doubt come to the well at noon so that she could come alone, because she was an outcast. So this woman goes back into town and brings as many people as she can back to meet Jesus, because of the transformation that has taken place in her life.

Sandwiched in the middle of that story is this conversation that Jesus has with his followers. His followers come back with food and they see Jesus talking to this woman. They find it strange that Jesus is talking with a woman. That would not have been acceptable in their day. Jesus is just breaking through barriers and boundaries of race and gender, showing us this essential truth: Jesus came as the Savior of the world. He came to seek and to save the lost.

What's taking place in the first part of the gospel of John is a series of encounters, a series of conversions. We read about Nicodemus in Chapter 3, a prominent Jewish leader who comes to

Jesus at night. There is a whole conversation about being born again. Then we read about this woman at the well -- a Samaritan now, the very opposite of Nicodemus. She is saved. The conversation revolves around the topic of worship. In the very next chapter Jesus will encounter a Roman official whose son is about to die, and that Roman official (probably a Gentile) comes to faith in Jesus Christ.

So you have a Jewish leader, a Samaritan woman in a series of broken relationships, and a Gentile official. We are seeing the heart of Christ -- just these wide boundaries with the harvest of God, of Jesus seeking and saving the lost. One paradigm holds true throughout each encounter, and that is the paradoxical nature of Christ, of Christianity. By that, I mean there are these apparently contrasting, contradicting truths that hold together attention. On the one hand, Jesus receives people and accepts them in their completely broken condition. There is this unparalleled expression of mercy and acceptance. Then there is this apparent contradiction, that at the same time, Jesus is challenging each person to change, to transformation. We saw it in the woman at the well. We saw where she is invited to drink of living water and to receive eternal life, but in the conversation Jesus exposes or reveals her sin and his knowledge of her sin.

Let me just say this, Riverside. As a church, if we know Christ and follow Christ, we will live with this tension. We will be the kind of church where people can come in who don't know anything about Christ or anything about religion. Their lives may be pretty well put together, or they may be a mess, but they immediately sense that no matter what their sin, they are welcome here. And, we must at the same time hold out the tension to come to Christ and receive his gift of salvation. It is a call to follow the lordship of Christ. It is a mandate to change and transformation.

There are many churches, I would estimate, that just do one or the other. There are churches who want to deliver a message: "Come as you are and stay as you are," which is not biblical truth in entirety. Then there are churches where you are really just not welcome. It may not be said, but the truth is, if you don't feel like you have your life together to some degree, you feel like you are not welcome. I want to say it unapologetically: That is contrary to the Spirit of Christ.

What happens in this passage, which is very helpful, is that Jesus makes explicit what we are observing. He teaches his disciples what they are watching take place. They are watching his conversations in these encounters. John is revealing them to us in his book and now Jesus teaches about the subject of the harvest.

So, we are going to look at two principles today -- a general principle and a specific principle. We will start with the general.

I. Doing the will of God is a great blessing.

Here is exactly what I mean by that. It may seem obvious at first, but as we get into it, you will see that it is not. Doing God's will is more beneficial, more satisfying, more strengthening, more joyous, and more fulfilling than eating. Jesus' disciples come back. They have the food. And what does Jesus say to them? Verse 32: "I have food to eat that you do not know about." He explains further in verse 34. "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." Notice the twofold explanation of doing the will of God and accomplishing his work. We will come back to that when we talk about the specific principle.

Now, Jesus is tired. He is weary. They are travelling. He is thirsty. He is hungry. They have gone to get food. They come back with the food. Jesus uses those circumstances to teach them a very important truth. It's not so much that he pushes through the challenging circumstances and overcomes his hunger and overcomes his thirst in order to teach them. No, he uses the actual circumstances to teach them, and he teaches them that doing the will of God renews us in the same way that eating renews us physically.

Scripture has a lot to say about this topic. Throughout the Old Testament food and wine are pictured as gladdening the heart of man. The entire liturgy of the Old Testament is built around feasting and feast celebrations -- not just a single meal, but actually days of feasting. In important moments of worship, the children of Israel would not only feast as a part of the worship, but the very way that the feasting was done was a teaching moment and would reveal spiritual truth.

So Jesus comes now with that image in mind and tells them that doing the Father's will is just like eating. This is a general principle, but we take the time to look at it because it's a neglected principle. We don't want to move too quickly to the specific principle that talks more about harvesting. What do I mean? It's not unusual for the teaching on the importance of obedience to God to be ignored or even to be denied in Christian circles. I think the reason that takes place is that we understand that salvation is a gift,

that we receive the gift of eternal life by free grace. It's the mercy of God. We are jealous to protect that cardinal truth. So we seem to be uncomfortable, at times, talking about the call from our Lord to follow him in obedience as he saves us.

It's not a biblical teaching to say that Jesus doesn't require obedience. It's very clear. In fact, when we get to the next chapter Jesus heals a man who has been lame for 38 years. He heals this man - it's such a picture of salvation - and the man doesn't even really understand what's going on. It would have been unusual, probably, to even live 38 years in his day. He has been lame for 38 years. He comes to this pool. The waters have stirred. There is a superstitious belief that if you are the first one in the water you will be healed. Jesus takes this man in his superstition and he heals him.

Then the religious leaders find the man and say, "Hey, who healed you?" He doesn't even know! He's not a very good Christian. Jesus finds him and look at what Jesus tells him. John Chapter 5, verse 14: "Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.'"

I just want to suggest to you that you can go for years to church services and never wrestle with: "What exactly does Jesus mean there?" The point is not that obeying or failing to sin or avoiding sin will save you, but there is the very clear call of Jesus to follow him as Lord. And what we see in our main text today is that that is not a burden to the Christian, but it brings tremendous joy and fulfillment and satisfaction and renewal. The truth is, the moment Jesus comes in by the Spirit of God and renews our hearts, there is an increasing desire to know him and to live to please him.

John Chapter 14, verse 21, Jesus speaking: "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him." There are many texts like this, where obedience is pictured as an avenue to intimacy with God. Again, just to be clear: Salvation is a gift, but when God renews our hearts, we understand the general blessing of living in obedience to him.

I just feel like I need to say this as we look at this general principle. I think all of us who are followers of Christ understand that this is a struggle. I doubt very seriously that there is any Christian here this morning who would say, "Oh yeah, obedience - I've got

this down. This is a snap. It's easy." It's a struggle in this life. I don't want to discourage you at all. If you have given a testimony that Jesus is your Lord and Savior and you find yourself struggling in sin...if you don't believe me, just think for a moment about the exhortation I gave earlier about finances.

I talked for four or five minutes about giving, about finances, about debt. It's not that I don't have a biblical warrant to do that as a pastor. There is just so much that Jesus tells us about that. But let's be real. Everyone perks up. Everyone has an opinion, and it immediately begins to test our hearts, doesn't it? Doesn't it? It does!

We are aware that sexual sin is not out there. We are aware that we battle sexual sin. We are more aware than people who don't know Christ that gossip and slander and dishonesty are daily temptations, and the temptation to not forgive and hold a grudge knocks at our door all the time. I am not for a moment implying that this isn't a struggle. In fact, it's this tension: We come to Jesus. We receive his grace and his mercy. He calls us to obey. And as soon as we start to walk, in trying to obey we have to quickly come back for grace and mercy. Amen? Yes! It's a struggle. But, just get comfortable because it's going to get worse before it gets better.

Jesus is telling you that obeying him is more important than lunch, which gives me permission to preach as long as I want to! Really, I'm amazed. I go to dinner parties, I go wherever, and Christians from other churches will come to me. As often as not, the thing they talk to me about, the question they ask me is: "How long do you preach for?" Really? I'm going to suggest to you that this is a teaching that will really help us.

Here is the background for it. We are almost certain that Jesus has Deuteronomy 8:3 in mind. This is what it reads: "And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

Here is what's happening in Deuteronomy 8. Moses is getting ready to go be with the Lord. He is preparing the children of Israel, after 40 years of wilderness wanderings, to go in and take the Promised Land without him. He is recounting to them, looking back at this wilderness journey, and he is showing how the Lord has worked in their lives. He

comes to the manna and tells them, “Do you remember this? It was a complete miracle! You didn’t know anything about how God would provide. This manna was a strange thing, but God was revealing something to you. He was revealing to you that man doesn’t live by bread alone.”

Jesus used this very same Old Testament text in response to his first temptation in Matthew Chapter 4. Matthew 4:3-4: “And the tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But he answered, ‘It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’ Jesus, in temptation, refuses to forego his fast. He refuses to use his power to prematurely meet his physical need in the moment.

Put it together: Deuteronomy and Matthew Chapter 4. God uses hunger in the lives of his people to teach an important spiritual lesson. It’s on the same continuum of what’s happening in John Chapter 4, right? There is a need to eat. God supernaturally feeds his people to show them his word is what really sustains them. Jesus uses the same principle in overcoming temptation and then illustrates it and demonstrates it in John Chapter 4. Are you with me?

I think it provokes or suggests an application for you and me, an application of fasting. When is the last time you fasted? Not that you missed a meal because you had to, but you missed a meal because you chose to? You missed a meal because you wanted to decrease physically so that you could increase spiritually. You wanted God to enlarge the truth of his word in your heart so you set aside your appetites for a brief period.

I want to invite you -- impromptu this week -- to fast. In fact, I want to encourage you as a way of applying this message, before this day is out (if you don’t spend the whole day eating), to get alone with the Lord and say, “How can I fast over the next seven days?” You can pick a period of time and have only water, so maybe that’s one meal, or two meals, or a full day. If you have not fasted before, I would strongly suggest you not try to do more than that. Or you can take something and go the whole week without it: coffee, or meat, or eat only meat. Eat only meat? No, that’s probably not what we have in mind here. Eat only vegetables and fruit -- what we could call a Daniel diet or a Daniel fast. Ideally, you would do a little bit of both.

So, in preparation for Easter -- a week from today is Palm Sunday -- set aside the physical, seeking the Lord. Miss a meal or more if you feel grace for it, and at the same time set something aside for the week. If you have grace for it, go for two weeks until you get to Easter Sunday.

The disciples help us here. This is so predictable, isn't it? They come back. They have the food. They say, "Jesus, here is the food." And he says, "I have food you don't know about." Then what do they say? "Who brought him food? Did he get food? Where did he get food? How did he get food?" You know what, they are trapped, aren't they, in the physical? This happens all throughout the gospels, where Jesus is teaching them important lessons, but they just don't get it.

Do you remember in Matthew, Mark, and Luke where Jesus does two miraculous feedings of masses of people? They get in the boat, they are going in the boat, and Jesus says, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees." They are like, "We forgot the bread! Oh no! He is rebuking us because we didn't bring the bread!" And Jesus' response is, "What is wrong with you guys? Did you not just see me feed thousands? Twice? I don't need your bread!" Right? That's us! If we are not careful, we are just so enslaved to the physical, to our own comfort, our own pleasure. And I want to qualify this -- it doesn't save you, it doesn't make you spiritual, but it's such a healthy spiritual discipline for us.

So, principle #1, and the shorter of the two: Doing the will of God is a great blessing.

II. God's will for you is to bring in his harvest.

We move from the general to the specific. The will of God, the accomplishing of the work of God here that is focused on is on bringing others to eternal life, bringing others to Jesus Christ. Jesus tells them, "You have said, haven't you, 'look, in four months the harvest will come - we plant, then we reap.' I want to tell you right now, as of my coming, the harvest is ready. It's a time to reap."

I think in actuality what we find in our own experience, and this passage supports it, is that we sow and reap simultaneously. But with Jesus' life, his revelation of the Father, his death, his resurrection, he is saying that now is the time for salvation. Now is the

time for people to come and to believe and to live for eternity, to experience eternal life now and forever.

We see this. Really, this is the theme of the passage. We see that the woman comes back from town, bringing the town with her, and they get saved. There is this incredible harvest. It will become more incredible as we move through, because as we move through the gospel of John this tension develops. Jewish religious leaders begin to demand of Jesus a sign from him. He is doing miracles everywhere, but they are demanding signs.

You have, in contrast, Jesus in Samaria with no apparent miracles, other than one conversation with this woman, and masses of people getting saved. That tension will develop for us, so that Jesus will say, "A prophet is without honor in his own town." He is saying that the very people that should have been the first to embrace the messiah, who knew to look for the messiah, are treating it like it's a familiar truth that they take for granted. They are not seeing what's right in front of them.

If you have been with us for the whole study, you can see now that John is really developing this theme -- that we are so lost that we want to stay in the darkness rather than come to the light. It's just so foolish, isn't it? Jesus heals a man lame for 38 years and our response is: "Give us a sign." It's the condition of our hearts and our need for the mercy of God.

Back to John Chapter 4. There is a harvest. He is calling now for his disciples to bring in the harvest. It's illustrated in the conversation with the woman, and now her example of giving testimony and bringing others to Christ. It's the call of God for all of us to bring others to Jesus.

I mentioned in the beginning that this is somewhat of an offensive truth for us - the whole idea of converting others. There are people, and maybe you are one of those -- you are a thinking person and you are saying, "You know, a lot of the teachings of Jesus are great, but I am offended by this idea." But what we are really saying -- and I am grateful to Timothy Keller for some of the foundations of this teaching; he has done a great job of unpacking it -- what we are really saying is that when we try to convert people, the truth we are sharing is not really truth. You see, it's okay to say, "Don't try to

convert me” provided that’s not really true. But if Jesus is who he said he was, if he did what the scripture says he did, then we have a whole different issue.

Let me illustrate it to you this way. If I am going home and come upon an accident and all of University is blocked off, and I call my wife and say, “Sweetheart, if you are going out, don’t go University because I don’t know what’s happened, but traffic is blocked both ways.” What would you think if her response to that was, “There you go again. You are always telling me what to do. It’s always got to be your way. We’ve got to go your way. Why are you pushing your opinion on me? Don’t you respect my opinion?” Would she respond that way? No. Why? Because it’s factual truth. She takes my word that the fact is that University is blocked.

Illustration #2: We get in the car to go on a date. We come to the first stop sign. She says, “Go this way.” Can I not find the restaurant? If you are married, you know this moment, right? We are going to have a conversation about where we are going, and how we are going to get there, and which way is faster, and one way is faster but one way is more scenic. This is truth on a whole other level, right? This is subjective! Maybe we think there is fact behind it, but it’s truth in a different category. When we say, “Don’t convert me, don’t evangelize me,” we are saying that religious truth is not really truth. It’s subjective truth. It’s truth of a different kind.

The problem is that you and I can’t live with that. You cannot stand here and say that racism is wrong unless you believe it is truth, truth of the first kind. It’s a religious conviction. It’s a moral value, and our society is built on that. We are constantly trying to convert people to a better understanding of what that truth is. The fact is that either Jesus is who he claims to be or he is not, and you have to respond to that truth. If it is true and you embrace it, you will unavoidably want to persuade others. We demonstrate it every day in life. We try to convert people to our football team, for goodness’ sake.

Look at her life. Do you remember the picture? The disciples come back. Jesus is talking with a woman! What is that about? He’s the Savior of the world – that’s what it’s about. Then the scripture tells us what she does. Did you notice? She leaves her water pot. She is living out this specific principle. She is going for a harvest! She can’t wait to

tell people about the transformation that Christ has brought in her life. We called attention to this earlier. The very things that she should be ashamed of in her past - she is saying that he knows it all! He loves me, and he saves me.

God calls us into that harvest, and what you find then is really two things: her testimony and the word of Christ. That's really the application for us of this specific principle. We want to share with people what Jesus Christ has done in our lives, and we want to share the truth -- the gospel.

You know, that can happen very simply, but when you go out this morning you are going to be given a personal testimony guide. It just walks you through three steps.

- What was your life like before you were saved?
- How did you get saved?
- How has your life changed since you were saved?

It's a way to share your testimony and to help you work through it. There is a bit more to it, but grab one of these as you go out. Sometimes it's helpful to say to people, "You know, Jesus saved me from anger. He showed me that my pride was at the root of my anger." "Jesus saved me from depression. He showed me that I was locked in an addictive personality." There are just easy ways for us to share what our lives were like before Christ came in, and how he in his mercy has saved us. And it's okay to say, "I still struggle. It is okay to make it contemporary to talk about how God is still helping us in these areas, but our testimony is vital. It's important for us to give clear explanation.

We said we had a general principle and a specific principle. When we put them together, we see that there is tremendous joy and fulfillment in making Christ known to other people. But maybe you and I have certain fears attached to that. I want to encourage you that there is a place of renewal when we just get past that and eagerly make Christ known.

One of the pictures here that Jesus gives calls to mind is Amos Chapter 9, verse 13, and we will end with this. There is this prophecy in Amos: "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it." It's prophetic. It's imagery, but

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the idea is that it's such a fruitful time that the person who is planting gets overrun by the person who is harvesting. You can't plant it fast enough, right? Now, that's prosperity. It's a spiritual image.

I believe that we see here something that's helpful for me and maybe it will help you. Really, sowing and reaping for us are the same activity. We are just sharing our testimony. We don't know if that person is ready to come to Christ or if they are hearing about Christ for the first time. We don't know if the process of salvation for them will come or not come, if it will be 10 minutes or 10 years, right?

It's the same activity. We are just interacting, sharing what Christ has done. We are not salespeople. We don't have to close the sale. In fact, we can't close the sale. We are unable to save people. We are just sharing Christ. "This is what he has done in my life. Here is the basic message: "We have sinned. We are under the judgment of God. We need a Savior. Jesus gave his life for the payment of our sin. Trust in him. Trust in him and follow him as your Savior and Lord. Call on the name of Jesus and you will be saved." The easiest way to do that is just to share simply what Christ has done in your life.

I have given you lots of applications today, lots of sermons - everything from giving, to sharing your faith, to fasting. Michelle mentioned that you are going to be given Easter cards as you go. If you say, "Brian, you don't understand. I am the biggest coward you know." You can do sneak attacks even with these cards. Right? Just leave them somewhere. But take a step of faith. Work on, think about, and pray about: "How do I share what Christ has done in my life with others?" So: testimony, invite people to church. As you fast, take the time to pray for your neighbors and work associates who don't know the Lord.

Last verse of our text today: "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."

Let's pray.

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