

# “Jesus Crosses a Racial Barrier” (John 4:4–10) //

## May 21, 2023 // *Ethnic Unity* Part 3

### Introduction

**J.D.: Well, we have something a little unusual for you today. Bryan and I are preaching together... (You see us both up and think, ‘oh great, now we’ll be in here for an hour and a half! No, we’re each doing half of a message).**

**This is the final week of a 3-week series** that has been like a 7-course meal on ethnic unity, so think of this as a little chocolate/vanilla swirl dessert to finish off our meal (Can I say that?)

The first week, I spoke, and I explained from Eph 2–3 why:

- **Ethnic unity is an important part of our mission, and not a distraction from it...**
  - The gospel, we saw, has both vertical and horizontal applications. Jesus' death on the cross tore down not only the barrier between man and God, it also tore down the barriers between hostile groups in society--and it did so by making insignificant those things in which we previously had found pride, and that led to division.
  - You see, all of us, we saw, tend to see the world through the lens of “in” groups and “out” groups--our groups, of course, are the “in” groups, and we look to different qualities of our group to affirm our sense of identity and superiority over others--that could be our background, our accomplishments, our supposed moral rectitude, or our ethnicity
  - The gospel tears down those walls by teaching us that when it came to God, we were all “outsiders”: in his eyes, there’s only one kind of human: sinner; only one hope, the blood of Jesus; and only one thing to boast in: his grace.
  - **So, while ethnic unity is not the gospel, it serves as compelling evidence of the gospel’s power.** We saw in Eph 3:10 that Paul said that one of the things that most reveals God’s multifaceted wisdom to powers and authorities—and to the broader world—is an ethnically unified church. Ethnic unity is something the world has craved since the tower of Babel but has been unable to achieve.
  - Well--Paul says, what the world couldn’t do, God did in the gospel. Ethnic unity in the church displays God’s multifaceted wisdom
  - And thus, the pattern of the Apostles going into a new city was to plant not two different churches on either side of town... FBC of the Jews... which would have been much easier--instead, they planted one church of Jew and Gentile and told them their ability to coexist in one body would be a sign of God’s power at work in the world.
  - For example, in Acts 16, Luke tells us that when Paul first carried the gospel into Philippi, the first 3 people he led to Christ... and Paul could say, “Who but God?”
- **So, we saw that the pursuit of ethnic unity is not a distraction from our mission,** but an important application of it.
- There are some obstacles... SATAN (too hard; political; what about the other side?)

**In week 2**, Pastor Bryan showed us from John 4 (which is where we're going to be this weekend, so if you have your Bible...) how one of the most well-known gospel encounters in Jesus' life took place in the context of racial division--a Jew crossed an established, societal barrier to talk with a Samaritan woman, and that encounter ended with the unthinkable: the Samaritan people of that city invited Jesus and his Jewish disciples to stay for an extended period of time with them. Centuries of division were crushed under the reconciling weight and power of the gospel! To be sure, this story is not ultimately about some kumbaya moment between two different ethnicities, but is about the power of the gospel to overcome these divisions in society and create "one new body of people." This was clearly a part of Jesus' mission. And so, if we're followers of Jesus, shouldn't it also be part of ours? You just can't read about Jesus or the letters of the New Testament and not see how this is a major theme.

Bryan then showed us that John 4 reveals three kinds of people when it comes to this aspect of the mission of Jesus:

- **There's "the RESISTANT"** who, like the orthodox Jews of Jesus' day, avoided Samaria altogether. The "resistant" don't want to engage in this at all; when we start talking about this, they retreat home to their political talking points and their suspicion of other ethnicities. Some of these guys have already put on to the calendar to come back next week. Bryan explained that the easiest way to identify someone who is resistant is that they put raisins on their potato salad...*right Bryan?*
- **Then there's "the RELUCTANT"**--this group is not closed to this discussion they are just a little gun-shy, because they've seen how quickly this discussion gets hijacked. They ask questions like, "Is this about politics? What's the agenda here? What about the problems the other group is bringing to this discussion--are those ever going to be addressed?" The disciples represent "the reluctant" in our story--they are not closed to what Jesus is doing, they are just a bit skeptical.
- **Then there's "the READY."** This is Jesus, of course: He actively engages this woman of another ethnicity and makes her friend and family.

**So, today, we want to take you on a deeper journey into "the ready."** What we want you to see is that the context for these discussions is relationships--this whole thing is not about getting a bunch of different-colored people in a room for a photo-op, it's about becoming the kind of people who find more commonality with others who belong to Jesus than we do those of our background and ethnicity; and becoming the kind of people who care more about reaching others with the gospel than we do hanging out comfortably with people from our tribe. We're not trying to host multi-ethnic events; we're trying to live multi-ethnic lives.

Let's start just by reading part of this passage together. **John 4:5-10** (you listen as I read)

**J.D. 5 So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.**

BRYAN: 7 A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 8 (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

**BRYAN:**

#### Ethnic Unity Begins on the Common Ground of the Gospel- John 4:5-6

J.D. is right, this whole scene takes place in a relational context, and ends in reconciliation. In fact, if there is one word which sums up the whole passage, it is the word *reconciliation*. We see vertical reconciliation as the Samaritan woman and the people of her town will be reconciled to God through Christ. And we see the beginnings of horizontal reconciliation as Jesus and the disciples will spend an extended period of time in a place they had been taught by the culture to avoid.

Like the Jews and Samaritans of Jesus' day, our world is in need of reconciliation. Yes, vertically- that's timeless, and as Paul says to the Corinthians, it's of "first importance". But we are also in need of horizontal reconciliation to one another. How does this happen? Our text shows us. Look with me at verses 5-6. It's interesting to me that John tells us exactly where they are- Jacob's Well, named after the grandson of Abraham, one of the patriarchs of Israel, a beloved figure. But he was also beloved by the Samaritans. Look at what she says in verse 12, "Are you greater than our father, Jacob?" It's clear, both the Jews and the Samaritans held Jacob to be in high regard. So this conversation takes place on what we would call common ground- they're at Jacob's well.

We all remember fractions don't we? Boy did I hate those growing up. Well, there's a simple rule when adding or subtracting fractions, and that is before you can add or subtract the denominator- the bottom number- has to be the same...we have to find the common denominator. There is no moving forward without doing the work to get to the common denominator. Step number one in bringing resolution to the problem is figuring out what's the common denominator.

What's true in fractions, is even more true for the body of Christ. Ethnic unity doesn't begin with our skin differences, or political differences, or worldview differences, it begins with what we have in common. Can I remind us of what we have in common? 1. We are all sinners. 2. Separated from God. 3. No way to get to God on our own. 4. Desperately in need of a Savior. 5. Saved by grace through faith. 6. Adopted into the family of God. 7. Which means we have siblings of every ethnicity. That's the common ground we have.

**J.D. I want to emphasize here: Ethnic unity does not require us divesting ourselves of our ethnicity. That would be both unnatural and unbiblical.** Notice, vs 9--In this story, without Jesus saying a word, she knew he was a Jew. How would she have known that unless Jesus...

talked with a Jewish accent, using Jewish idioms and forms of speech; dressing in Jewish fashions? (Scholars say it was really popular in those days for Jews to wear those new “Air Jeremiah” sandals, and I bet Jesus probably had on a pair of the retro 3’s and she was like, “By your footwear, I can clearly see you are a Jew.” Or something like that. Whatever--the point is: Jesus, it was obvious that Jesus, culturally, was a Jew! Furthermore, John identifies the woman in this story by her ethnicity. We’re never given her name--she’s just “a Samaritan.” And that is very intentional. John wants to draw our attention to race. This story is, in part, about what happens between hostile ethnicities when they find reconciliation in the gospel.

**The point to take away here is that unity does not require us losing who they are or shedding their ethnicity when they walk in the door.** Our ethnicity is an important aspect of God’s image in us! God created the different cultures and backgrounds so that his glory would be refracted through us as through a kaleidoscope! **(Do you remember how (pic) a kaleidoscope works?** You look at some source of light and the kaleidoscope refracts into all these colors and shades. That’s what God does with the various ethnicities.)

- **In the Bible, the primary word for people groups is ethnos**, from which we get our word ethnicity, and Revelation is clear that we will take that ethnicity with us into heaven. We know that because in Revelation when the Apostle John gives us that vision of that innumerable throng of people around the throne, and says there are people there of every “nation, tribe, people and language.” He’s **not seeing some big homogenous group--white, black or brown**; he’s seeing the kaleidoscope of God’s glory radiating through the various ethnicities of the world as they are united in worship
- **There’s two ways we can go wrong with this:** On the one side: you adopt **color-blindness** where you say things like, “I don’t see color.” Well, you should see color. It’s part of God’s glory. (Or it comes out when you fail to recognize that a lot of your own preferences and ways of seeing things are cultural, and the way you see the world is just “normal,” and only other people have cultural preferences. All of us operate out of a particular cultural framework. I remember one time hearing this famous Baptist pastor talk about how dumb it was for this new generation to try to adapt the gospel to changing culture. But he said that from a big wooden pulpit in his 3-piece suit. This preacher’s expression of Christianity was every bit as cultural as the young pastors he was trying to criticize--it’s just that his preferred culture was the 1950’s! AnJust in case you’re unclear, that’s not how Jesus preached! A suit and tie and a big, wooden pulpit are a cultural expression, but it’s cultural.
- Listen: Culture is really easy for us to see in others, but much harder to see in ourselves. Maybe you can see pretty easily now that a church building with pews and an organ is a cultural expression. But it’s legitimately hard, especially for those of us in the majority culture, to see how much of what we do is just an expression of our own cultural norms.
- None of us decides, “Well, I’d better get out there and do a lot of super white things today.” And yet, I know that much of what I do, as a white man, arises from culture without me even knowing it. Not every culture in the world has the same affinity for Nicolas Cage and that’s weird to me--but that’s just a cultural proclivity I have. But one I will be taking into heaven with me, FTR.

- **So the one error is color-blindness;** the other error is “color-idolatry,” where our ethnicity becomes the most defining thing about us and forms the primary basis of those we feel kinship with. Paul says that identity must be subjected to our identity in Christ, AND to the interests of the gospel.
- **It’s like I explained the first week**--Pastor Thabiti’s concept of the 3rd race. Your first race is whatever you are (for me, Scotch-Irish)... Paul is saying that when we become Christians, our first race doesn’t go away, but our most defining race becomes that 3rd one--who we are in Christ. In his resurrection, Jesus started a “new race” of men--a Kainos race--and that new race becomes our most defining identity, more important than all the others.
- In fact, Paul even said he could lay aside his first race whenever it was helpful for the gospel. In 1 Cor 9 he said, “To the Jew, I became a Jew... to the Gentile, I became as a Gentile...and I did this so that I might win some of them.” (1 Cor 9:20) IOW, Paul is saying that in certain situations, take his ethnicity on and off like a garment if it was helpful to the gospel. Paul brought everything in his life into submission to the Lordship of Christ and the service of the gospel, and that included his ethnic preferences.

**So, we have to avoid these two errors--color-blindness and color-idolatry.**

BRYAN:

**Ethnic Unity is Helped When We Honor People’s Humanity- John 4:7-9:**

I’m comforted by the fact that Jesus didn’t just bring his deity to this conversation but his humanity as well, as a Jew. Race has done such a number on us in our country, that it’s easy to drift into one of the two extremes you talked about, JD- color blindness or color idolatry. Asian Author and Christ follower, Sarah Shinn speaks to this when she says, “The reality of the fall is that each of our cultures has experienced sin and evil. As a result, we can define our view of our ethnicity by its scars: I’m the sin, or I’m the sin done to me. And our view of other ethnicities can also be to define it by its scars”- Sarah Shinn, *Beyond Colorblind*. This is a real problem that we are seeing especially today, which is why we as Christ followers need to reject any view which seeks to limit humanity to an oppressed/oppressor binary, in which we solely view people by their scars or the scars they inflict. We must see ourselves through Christ’s scars on our behalf. This creates a new humanity.

But at the same time this does not mean we turn a blind eye to the realities of sin and the human condition. Jesus, again, models this for us. **Look at verses 7-9.** In a culture where no right minded Jew would go through Samaria, Jesus not only stops, but asks a Samaritan woman for a drink, and sits and holds a conversation with her. These actions communicate one thing- a deep profound sense of honor. But there’s more. Remember, and we cannot overstate this, in the larger framework, this is a story about the gospel. Jesus is going to talk to her about living water, reveal her sin, and ultimately change her life. Please notice the order though- before he gets to her soul, he first honors her humanity. Here’s the **principle: People will often not allow us to get to their real needs unless we first address their felt needs.**

I have a good friend of mine who happens to be white and quite wealthy. We met when he started to attend our multiethnic church I was leading at the time. Things were going along quite well until he invited me to play golf at his club. Well, after like the fourth or so time turning him down, he asked me why? I said, well, your club is a restrictive one- blacks cannot join. And in a moment of vulnerability I said I had a problem with that not mattering to him. It was pretty awkward. Well, three months later he came back and said he had changed all that. He had some conversations, and if I was willing to apply he was assured I could get in. I was like, "Bro, that's not what I had in mind when we talked." Needless to say, I didn't join, and to this day the club is still restrictive, but our friendship took a richer, more vibrant turn. I felt seen and heard. Even though the problem wasn't solved, my humanity was honored.

I have a friend of mine who pastors a church very similar to ours in the south, and is on this same journey of ethnic unity. He talks often of three ways they look to honor the humanity of others in their church: **Listen. Learn. Lament**. We talked some about listening last week, noting how part of our problem is when it comes to the race conversation we tend not to listen to understand, but listen to respond. Doing the work of deep listening where we ask questions, and seek to understand, even though we may not agree, is a great way to honor humanity.

Right in the middle of the racial turmoil of 2020, Pastor JD and I spent some time with several police officers (most of the officers were white) along with people of color- both groups belonging to our church. We didn't do much talking, but listened. We listened as the police officers, in tears, shared their hearts. And while we didn't agree on everything, I emerged not only feeling as if that was the best meeting I'd been a part of in years, but also with a deeper sense of empathy and understanding, and they felt honored by us initiating the conversation.

Secondly, we learn together. We do this by reading books on race, visiting museums and other experiences. This is no different than when some of you went to your spouse's high school reunion, and met all the people she knew, and heard all the stories. Yeh, I know it can be hard to get excited about that, but when the night ended, if you were like me, you walked away with a greater appreciation and understanding. Finally, we lament with each other. The bible says to grieve with those who grieve. The practice of lament heaps huge honor on the one's most directly impacted by the event. When we do these three things together- listen, learn and lament, we honor each other's humanity.

**J.D. The point here is that this whole encounter is relational--the gospel compels us to enter into relationships with those on the other side of ethnic barriers.** And we do so not first as litigators seeking to defend ourselves, but as family, seeking to bear each other's burdens.

Let me tell you how this conversation has changed for me. It's changed me as I have engaged in actual relationships with actual people of other ethnicities. It's not that my perspective or my political views on everything have changed. They haven't. Sure, there are things I see from a different perspective now, but in large part, what's changed is my understanding of the questions and hurt and struggle certain of my friends bring to certain discussions. And when you

love someone and you enter their world, it helps you understand what they are bringing to the table. And, my relationships with people of other ethnicities have made me especially zealous to stand alongside them and lament with them in times where they do experience actual injustice--because now those realities are not just things I am seeing on the news--it feels personal to me now because it affects people I love.

And those friends have done the same for me in return, too. I'm able to process with Bryan, for example, "Hey, this happened to me and that doesn't feel fair..." or "This seems totally backwards..." and Bryan, who is an excellent friend on these matters, always first communicates empathy and understanding. He always tells me, "Listen: Don't be reserved with me in how you are processing this. Let me see it from your perspective." Everybody needs a Bryan in their life--but don't reach out to Bryan because he already has too many friends as it is. And I can't have you taking up time slots in his life that I need.

But those kinds of relationships are what I am talking about. That's why we say at TSC that we don't want to host multiethnic events; we want to live multiethnic lives. That's the key. Not a weekend photo op but genuine family relationships. MLK famously said that the most segregated hour... If I could be so bold...

Summit, this is our future... Years ago, 2003, Pastor Chris and Rick and I went up to BTC... Shortly after that I had this experience in which I went to black church... we had started to reach some African Americans...

### **Conclusion:**

**OK? The focus of John 4 is not ethnic unity**--it is reconciliation in the gospel, but then it gives us a demonstration of what happens in our relationships when we receive it. This woman receives the gospel for herself and then shares it with her fellow Samaritans, and that leads to *the unthinkable*--these Samaritans asking this Jewish Jesus and his Jewish followers to stay two days with them! Hundreds of years of racial animus undone in one afternoon through the power of the gospel.

### **VAMP**

And once again we see that **the gospel is the most powerful force on the planet**—able to do in ethnic unity what no other societal program can do!

- **The gospel gives us a new identity:** In Christ, there's only one human race: sinner. There's only one hope: Jesus. And only one reason to boast: his grace in our lives. And that tears down the wall of hostility at its foundations, giving us a unity in the gospel that trumps any cultural thing that divides us.
- **Furthermore, the gospel motivates us to lay our preferences** aside for the sake of reaching others. The first week, I pointed out the irony of coming in each week to worship a Savior who laid down all his preferences for us while insisting everyone else conform to our preferences. We'll never be asked to accommodate more for our neighbors than Jesus

accommodated for us. The gospel produces in us the kind of others-focused selflessness that produces ethnic-unity.

- **Let me conclude with one more: the gospel gives us the power to love and forgive others and keep pursuing them after they have** disappointed us or hurt us. Sometimes, the obstacle in ethnic unity is not a lack of understanding (or anything else we've identified in this group); it's a matter of forgiving people who have harmed you or your people group. Again and again. You've been disrespected, or overlooked, or had your motives called into question again and again and this whole venture just doesn't seem worth the trouble!
- I know some of you feel weary in this journey. It would feel so much easier to retreat back into what feels natural, and safe—to huddle amongst your own people—with those who understand you and with whom relationships don't feel so difficult. The gospel has something for you, too: It can give you the power to keep going.

**I've always been moved by the story of Corrie Ten Boom (this is from her biography, *The Hiding Place*).** Corrie was a Dutch Christian who, during WW2, hid Jews in her home, helping them escape the Gestapo. One day, however, she was caught, and she and her sister were sent to a Nazi concentration camp. The conditions inside, she said, were brutal. The guards mocked and mistreated and abused them, eventually killing her sister. Corrie survived, however, and was liberated at the end of WW2.

She tells the story of how, **several years later**, a couple of decades **after the war was over**, she was speaking at a church service—about forgiveness—when afterwards an old man stepped forward. She recognized his face, and he confessed to her that he had been one of the guards at her prison, but had since been born again. “Will you forgive **ME?**” he asked. This was the man who tortured her and killed the most precious person in the world to her—her sister. This is how she recounted that moment: *“I knew I had to take the man’s hand. I knew it. You see, the message that God forgives US has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. I told myself, ‘I don’t know if I can forgive him, but I can lift my hand. I can do that much. Jesus, I’ll raise my hand, you have to do the rest.’ And as I [reached out my hand] (she says), an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. ‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart.’ For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, then embraced each other’s arms, the former guard and the former prisoner united in Christ. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.”*

Maybe you are one of the ones who feels bitterness, or anger, or fatigue in this journey. I want to compel you: take that first step. Raise that hand. Reach out to that person. Start praying for them. Enter into a relationship. And Jesus, through the wonder-working power of the Holy Spirit, will do the rest.



We want to close in a way that feels appropriate... we only do this kind of thing occasionally because of how uncomfortable I know it makes some of you feel...

## **Corporate Response Prayer (all together)**

<sup>9</sup>Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

<sup>10</sup>Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

<sup>11</sup>Give us this day our daily bread,

<sup>12</sup>and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

<sup>13</sup>And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.