

Food and Field

John 4:27-38

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²⁷ 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?” ²⁸ So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, ²⁹ “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” ³⁰ They went out of the town and were coming to him.

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” ³² But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” ³³ So the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought him something to eat?” ³⁴ Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

– John 4:27-38, ESV

Introduction: What Drives Your Life?

I would like to begin with a question: Why do you do what you do? What drives your decision-making? Some of it is pure biological necessity, of course. We eat when we’re hungry. We drink water when we’re thirsty. We sleep when we’re tired. But that really doesn’t cover much of our decision-making, so what drives the rest? Why do you buy what you buy or go where you go or do what you do?

Most of us probably don’t think that much about these kinds of questions, and so the easiest and quickest reply to such questions is probably, “Because I want to.” We all have certain things we like or dislike, so we mostly just do what we like. But if we have a more long-range frame for our decision-making, it may be driven by our desire to save money for college or for a big purchase or a nice vacation, or maybe our efforts are geared toward trying to get a promotion at work or to try to spend more time with our family. Nothing is wrong with any of these things, of course, but where does God come into the picture? Are we guilty of mostly asking Him to bless our desires and our plans, or are we taking time to align our priorities and our desires with His agenda for the world, the church and our lives?

In today’s passage, Jesus tells the disciples what drives His decision-making in a powerful statement: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.” He also calls His disciples to raise their eyes above their normal perspective when He tells them, “Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.” As we explore this passage, we’ll focus on these two themes: the food that should fuel our lives and the fields we need to look up and see.

A. FOOD (vv. 27-34)

Our passage today begins right after Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman ends. "Just then his disciples came back." Notice how perfect God's providence is. The disciples have been in town buying food, and now they return to the well with food at exactly the right moment. If they had come back any earlier, they would have interrupted Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman and the conversation would not have reached its wonderful conclusion. If they had come back any later, they would not have seen Jesus talking with the woman and would not have had cause to wonder what was going on, which prompts Jesus' engagement with them.

Aligning our agenda and desires with God's must begin with a full knowledge of and strong confidence in His wonderful sovereign providence over, in and through all things. Just this week, I was reading about this in *Jewels from John Newton*. Newton writes:

All the abilities, powers, and instincts that are found amongst creatures, are emanations from His fullness. All changes, successes, disappointments – all that is memorable in the annals of history, all the risings and fallings of empires, all the turns in human life – take place according to His plan. In vain men contrive and combine to accomplish their own counsels, unless they are parts of His counsel likewise: the efforts of their utmost strength and wisdom are crossed and reversed by the feeblest and most unthought-of circumstances. But when He has a work to accomplish, and His time is come, however inadequate and weak the means He employs may seem to a carnal eye, the success is infallibly secured: for all things serve Him, and are in His hands as clay in the hands of the potter. Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Thy ways, Thou King of the Saints!

I. Not Social Customs or Expectations

They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you seek?" or, "Why are you talking with her?"

Jewish social custom looked down on men who spoke with women, especially rabbis. Rabbis were not supposed to talk with any women in public for two reasons: If they were talking to someone other than their wife, it would cause scandalous gossip. If they were talking to any woman, including their wives, they were wasting time that could be spent either studying Torah or teaching men. Teaching women was definitely considered a waste of time.

Jesus was engaged in conversation with a woman who had a scandalous reputation, which is the worst possible kind of woman for a rabbi to be seen talking to. Moreover, He had initiated the conversation, which the disciples did not know, but still the very fact that this conversation was even happening caused them to marvel, a word which means they were amazed, not necessarily shocked or scandalized, because none of them would have suspected Jesus of any serious wrong-doing. Rather, it appears they were amazed at how Jesus would refuse to be bound by social customs.

2. Not Materialism

Rather than asking Jesus about His conversation with the woman, which they were too amazed to do, the disciples instead offer Him some of the food they had gone into town to buy. They had probably set some food out and, after seeing that Jesus was not eating it, they urged Him, “Rabbi, eat!”

Jesus replies to their offer and their urging with an unexpected response, “*I have food to eat that you do not know about.*” The way the disciples respond to this statement shows us that their thinking is no more spiritual or profound than that of the Samaritan woman when she wanted Jesus to give her a supply of water that would keep her from having to come to the well any more. They are very simply focused on material concerns and not much more. So Jesus has to correct them. Material things are important in their proper place, but we can so easily become overly focused and overly concerned about them.

3. Doing the Will of God

Jesus, without openly rebuking the disciples for their materialist assumptions, tells them clearly what He meant by the food He has that they do not know about: “*My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.*”

“To do the will of Him who sent me” – This is the first of 9 different times in the Gospel of John when Jesus refers to God the Father as “Him who sent me.”

1. *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. – John 5:24*
2. *“I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.” – John 5:30*
3. *For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. – John 6:38-39*
4. *Jesus then said, “I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to him who sent me.” – John 7:33*
5. *We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. – John 9:33*
6. *And Jesus cried out and said, “Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me.” – John 12:44-45*

7. *But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. – John 15:21*

8. *But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ - John 16:5*

We’ll look more closely at each of these verses when we come to them, but for now it’s important for us to see how much Jesus saw Himself as a missionary, a sent one, sent from God the Father to the world to do the Father’s will and accomplish His work. The expression Jesus uses here in John 4 to describe accomplishing or finishing God’s work uses the same verb that He would cry out on the cross when He cried, “It is finished!” So Jesus was sent to accomplish the work of God, and He did that work until it was finished on the cross.

When Jesus left the world to return to Him who sent Him, He commissioned His disciples to be apostles, which means “sent ones,” saying to them, “*As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.*” – John 20:21 Now, you and I are not the Messiah, nor are we the apostles, but we have been sent. Do we have the same sense of our identity as being sent-ones, sent by God into the world to do His will?

B. FIELD (vv. 35-38)

When Jesus wants the disciples to see for themselves what God is calling them to have as their food, He tells them to look up and look beyond themselves: “*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.*” The disciples need to look up from the food that is in front of them and see the harvest field that is literally coming toward them.

Jesus begins by saying, “*Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest?’*” He is either quoting a proverb about the time between the finishing of the sowing of seed and the beginning of the reaping of the harvest, or else He is quoting something they were just talking about in conversation, that the harvest season was still four months away, which would mean that they are here in Samaria in early January. Either way, Jesus wants them to look up “and see that the fields are white for harvest.”

I. Unexpected People

What Jesus wants His disciples to see is a crowd of unexpected people coming their way. The Samaritans from the village of Sychar were coming out to the well to see Jesus. They are coming in response to the testimony of the Samaritan woman:

So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people,²⁹ “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?”³⁰ They went out of the town and were coming to him. – vv. 28-30

This woman left her water jar behind so Jesus could have the drink He had asked for and also because she knew she was coming back to talk to Jesus more. She just wanted to bring more people with her.

If the disciples were shocked to see Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman, they had to be shocked to look up and see a huge crowd of Samaritans heading right for them. Given the history of hostility between Jews and Samaritans, the disciples might have been afraid to see a Samaritan crowd coming their direction, but these Samaritans weren't angry, they were curious.

2. Unanticipated Reaction

The Samaritans had heard the testimony of this notorious woman, the woman who had evidently been shunned from polite company, and they had a most unexpected reaction: They believed her. They listened to what she had to say and believed her enough to be intrigued and to follow her out to see Jesus.

Now, what she said to them was a slight exaggeration, *"Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did."* But the heart of what she meant was true enough: Jesus had told her enough about her shameful past that she knew He was someone supernaturally empowered by God. Jesus had told her that He was the Messiah. She thought He was, but she wanted to know what the rest of the people in her town thought. She asked them *"Can this be the Christ?"* in a way that invited them to draw their own conclusions.

The courage of the Samaritan woman, who overcame the shame of her past to openly engage her neighbors in conversation and the unexpected positive response of her fellow townspeople combine in God's sovereign plan to bring a wave of people to see Jesus.

3. Unprepared Disciples

The disciples, meanwhile, are completely unprepared. They had just been in the town for some period of time, buying food. We don't know how long they spent on this errand, but evidently they did not speak to people about Jesus or try to get any of the Samaritans to come and see Him. Meanwhile, this lowly woman goes into town and, within a few minutes, is on her way back with a large crowd following her.

Jesus' unprepared disciples, whose minds are only on their grumbling stomachs, are about to enter into the joy of a harvest they had not worked to produce.

4. A Prepared Field

The disciples were being drawn into a field they had not prepared but which had been prepared for them:

³⁶Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

In foretelling the coming of the Messiah and the dawning of the glorious Messianic age, Amos the farmer-prophet was given a word from the Lord in Amos 9:13:

*“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.*

Here we see this prophecy coming to fruition with these Samaritans. Jesus had just sown the seed in this woman’s heart and already, within minutes, she has come to eternal life and now she is bringing more people with her.

Jesus told the disciples that “others have labored,” probably referring to John the Baptist and Himself, since John had just been ministering in this area perhaps a few weeks or months before this. He now tells them that He is sending them to reap that for which they did not labor. They will get the privilege of rejoicing together with the sower, Jesus Himself, at the joy of harvest.

5. A Compelling Call

Now, not every evangelistic encounter ends with such stunning success as we see unfolding in Sychar. Jesus Himself saw very little fruit from much of His preaching ministry in Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, so little that He pronounced woes upon them in Matthew 11:20-24. The Apostle Paul, when he went into new cities with the Gospel, was met with some faith and much opposition and resentment.

Still, the call from Jesus to be engaged in the work of evangelism, of sharing the good news about Jesus and laboring for the salvation of others is a compelling call. Nothing else we choose to do in this life can be as meaningful, as eternally impactful or as potentially deeply satisfying as being used by God to bring others to eternal life in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion: Seeing People Come to Jesus

It is wonderful to see people come to faith in Jesus. We can rejoice greatly as we see our efforts being used by God to bear fruit for eternal life.

But we can also find deep joy and satisfaction even if we don’t personally see much outward fruit. We can remember what Jesus said, *“here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’”* We can be the sower or we can be the reaper. Rarely will we be both.

The devotional from John Newton’s writing that I read earlier this week concludes like this:

This is the God whom we adore. This is He who invites us to lean on His almighty arm, and who promises to guide us with His unerring eye. He says to you, and even to me, “Fear not. I am with thee.

Be not dismayed; I am thy God. I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.” Therefore, while in the path of duty, and following His call, we may cheerfully pass on, regardless of the apparent difficulties; for the Lord, whose we are, and who has taught us to make His glory our highest end, will go before us, and at His word crooked things become straight, light shines out of darkness, and mountains sink into plains. Faith may and must be exercised; experience must and will confirm what His word declares, that the heart is deceitful, and that man in his best estate is vanity; but His promises to them that fear Him shall be confirmed likewise, and they shall find Him, in all situations, a sun, a shield, and an exceeding great reward.

Few men in church history have walked by faith and depended on God in prayer like George Muller, who founded many orphanages by faith in England in the late 1800's. Early in his life, Muller made the acquaintance of three men and began to pray for their salvation. His diary indicates that he prayed for these three men specifically daily. Muller lived a long time, but when he died, not one of them had come to faith in Jesus. But the story did not end with the death of George Muller. Later, all three men did, in fact, come to faith in Jesus, two of them in their 70's and one in his 80's. We must never allow delays or discouragements to keep us from doing the will of God and seeking, by His grace, to accomplish whatever work He has given us to do!