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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

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**So They Picked Up Rocks to Throw at Him**

**John 8:59**

**Prayer:** *Father God, we do thank you for the blood of your Son. We just thank you for that incredible gift, and Lord, we just again each month at the first Sunday of the month we come together to focus on the cross, on what it is you've done for us there at the cross, and so this morning, Lord, as we open up your book, as we look into it, as we again delve into that incredible gift, I pray for your spirit's presence, I pray for your unction, I pray that we would anew find depths that we've never explored and understandings that we've not had and that you would again be glorified in all that we do. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, as I said, it's the first Sunday of the month and again, this is the Sunday that we remember Jesus Christ and his cross. And Jesus on the night before he died, he met with his disciples and there for the last time celebrated a Passover supper with them, and Matthew 26:26 describes it, it says this, it says: *Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."*

*And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."* Jesus took bread and he took wine and he offered them up as symbols of his flesh and his blood and then he asked his disciples to eat the bread and to drink the cup in order to symbolically eat his flesh and drink his blood. And then he asked them to repeat the remembrance of this sacrifice on a regular basis. That's what we call the Lord's table. And we celebrate it once a month by meditating on what it is the Lord Jesus Christ did for us at the cross, by examining ourselves, by asking God's Holy Spirit to open up our hearts and minds, convicting us of sin, by confessing that sin, and then by participating in the elements. *John 6:53* says: So Jesus said to them, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."*

So we've been following the life of Jesus and we've worked our way now to the very end of the eighth chapter of the gospel of John. If you remember where we were the last time, Jesus is engaged in a very difficult discussion, and it starts out with many in the crowd believing in him but it ends with many in that same crowd picking

up stones to stone him. And so this morning I want to look at a contrast. I want to look at an incredible contrast between the crowd's reaction to the gospel and the reaction of the woman at the well. Same gospel; extremely different response. Now we know that God is not a respecter of persons and we know that Jesus spoke the truth to whomever he was speaking it to, whether it be the woman at the well who heard his words and believed them and allowed them to transform her life or whether it was to this crowd of professed believers who heard his words and were transferred from false believers into murderous thugs who were looking to kill Jesus. See, the gospel has the power to do just that.

Greg Gilbert in his powerful little book entitled *What is the Gospel?* says this: "Contexts change, angles change, words change, and approaches change, but somehow and in some way the earliest Christians always seem to get these four issues: We are accountable to the God who created us. We have sinned against that God and we will be judged. But, God has acted in Jesus Christ to save us, and we take hold of that salvation by repentance from sin and faith in Jesus."

See, according to Gilbert, the gospel can be summed up in these four words: God, man, Christ, response. And every time the gospel is presented that way, it'll move its hearers in either of two

different directions. It'll move them either into light and life, or it will move them into darkness and death. The woman at the well was moved into light and life upon hearing the gospel. The false believers that Jesus confronted, well, they heard the same gospel, but they moved instead into darkness and death. And so the question that we want to ask this morning is why? Why did that happen? I mean, Jesus told both groups the same gospel story. He told them about God as their heavenly father, he told them about fallen man's need for a savior, he told them that he indeed was the God man Christ, the Savior, and that the secret to eternal life was hearing and obeying his call. God, man, Christ, response. That was the gospel that Jesus preached, and the response to that call couldn't possibly have been more different. I mean, the woman at the well was gloriously saved by that gospel and she became in fact the first very passionate evangelist. The crowd of mere believers who surrounded Jesus, well, they heard the very same gospel from the very same source. And after first believing in him, they grew progressively more and more outraged until they ended up trying to kill him. And so we ask again why? Well, if you look at the woman at the well, we can first observe that she started out with an advantage of sorts. You see, she was a social outcast. She was a public sinner. And the advantage that she had was that her sin had already found her out.

1 Timothy 5:24 says: *The sins of some men are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. You see, if your sin is right there in front of you like hers was, then you have no false righteousness to cling to. The false believers that Jesus was confronting, they had no such advantage. See, it's not that they didn't have a huge problem with sin. It's that their sin was a socially acceptable sin. You know, the woman at the well had five husbands, and the man that she was living with wasn't her husband. That's a sin that is impossible to stay hidden. The religious leaders, their hearts were filled with jealousy and envy, these were hearts that were capable of torturing and murdering God himself. And when they got that opportunity, that's just what they did. And yet their sins were so well hidden that they were considered to be the good people, the outstanding people, the people connected to God by birth, by custom, and by conduct. And so when it came to spiritual health, they considered themselves to be in top-notch shape. And it was that misplaced spiritual self-confidence that made it impossible for them to see God when they were speaking directly to him. That's why Jesus once said in that Luke 5:31, he said: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."*

You see, the difference between the woman at the well and the

unbelieving crowd was not that they were not both sinners. It's that the woman was able to see herself as spiritually sick and in need of the great physician, and the crowd saw no such need. They were the so-called righteous that Jesus said he would never call to repentance. You know, their righteousness existed only in their own minds but they so genuinely believed in that righteousness that it would forever preclude their seeking repentance. Jesus starts out with both parties at the same place where we all need to start, and he starts out with our need for God. And he approaches each one's need for God by addressing their immediate needs. In the case of the woman at the well, it was -- obviously she had a need to draw water. And so Jesus meets her right there and right then and this is what he says in *John 4:10*, he says: "*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.*" So he asked this woman if she'd like to receive living water instead of the water that she normally draws out of the well. And of course that question gets her thinking. And the woman's intrigued with the possibility of this water and she's thinking about it strictly in earthly terms, but she's thinking of it as something that would make her life easier. And because of that, she's willing to hear what Jesus has to say. Well, not so the crowd. You see, Jesus also addressed the immediate need of the unbelieving crowd when he said, "*If you abide in my word, you are*

*truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* (John 8:31-32) Now you would think that the Jews after having suffered 400 years of Egyptian slavery and now suffering under the boot of Rome's domination would understandably be attracted to someone who's offering them freedom. To them it was like offering a drowning man a glass of water. And it was the last thing they were interested in.

So Jesus is addressing the first two parts of the gospel, the God part, and the man part, and both the woman and the crowd knew there was a God and they also knew that man had been separated by God from sin. I mean, the woman understood all too well what sin had done in her life. She just was not prepared to address it until Jesus made it an issue. And one simple statement by Jesus broke open completely her sin issue. This is what happened in *John 4:16*, it says: *Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here."* *The woman answered him, "I have no husband."* *Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband;' for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true."* *The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet."* Jesus, he forces her to stare right at the sin in her life, and her immediate reaction is evasion, do anything to get that spotlight of truth off of her. *"Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet."* Now she's still not

ready to receive the gospel. She's still stuck in the God man dilemma, and that is, God is holy and she like all of us is a sinner. But again, she's got an advantage here. See, her sin unlike the unbelieving crowd's sin is impossible to conceal, but still she resists.

Now, the religious crowd knew that God and man were separated by sin, I mean, after all, they were the religious leaders. They just didn't see themselves in the same category of sinner as everybody else. See, because of their birth they somehow thought of themselves as exempt from sin. So this crowd responds to Christ's probing by growing instantly defensive. In *John 8:33* it says: *They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" And Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin."*

Now, the woman at the well, well she's clearly a slave to sin as well. Her response, well it's to double down on the evasion. She starts adopting the very same tactics that the religious crowd had adopted. In fact, you could say she got religion. This is what she says in *John 4:20*, she says, *"Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship."* Jesus, instead of focusing on me and my five

husbands, how about if I shift your gaze to a technical question as to what mountain we're really supposed to be worshiping on. You see, at this point, the woman at the well and the religious crowd, they're both still equally lost. And Jesus has brought both parties to the gospel through the God part, and then through the man part, and now he's going to bring the Christ part. This is the part where we learn that God himself became a man and offered up his perfect life in the place of our sinful life. As 2 Corinthians 5:21 puts it: *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* Jesus begins to press the woman at the well about the Christ part and this is what he says. This is John 4:21: *"Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."*

You know, there are lots and lots of cults that deny the deity of

Christ, and among them is the Jehovah's Witnesses. And you've probably all have had these different conversations with Jehovah's witnesses, and one of the frequent claims that they make is that Jesus never claimed to be God. You cannot get a more obvious claim to deity than what Jesus plainly stated to the woman at the well: *"I who speak to you am he."*

Jesus presses the religious crowd with the very same claim when he says this in John 8:54, he says to the crowd: *"If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God'. But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." Jesus is unequivocally stating his claim to deity. You know, he doesn't say before Abraham was I was. He says before Abraham even existed, I was already in the present I am. "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." You know, if there was ever any doubt whatsoever about his claim to deity, it's confirmed by the response of the unbelieving crowd. John 8:59 says: *So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the**

temple. Stoning was the punishment for blasphemy. Stoning was the punishment for making yourself equal to God.

As the elders come forward to begin distributing the bread, I want to again spend some time considering the four parts that make up the gospel: God, man, Christ, response. And we're looking at two different case histories that have more or less traveled along parallel paths when it comes to God and man and Christ. And it's only when we get to the response part do we see that we have in essence two completely different endings. As the bread is being distributed, consider the ending that has brought you here to this place at this time. Consider the amazing grace that you and I have received.

Consider as the bread is being distributed this warning that God gives about communion itself. This is from *1 Corinthians 11*, verse 28: *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.* You know, as I say each month, communion is extremely serious business, and to enter into

it in an unworthy manner is to literally court disaster. I repeat the warning: If you are not absolutely confident that you are a child of the King or if you first need to be reconciled to your brother or sister before you bring your sacrifice to the altar, then just pass the elements on as they come to you. I say it each month, no one's going to think you're weird, no one's going to think you're odd or strange. In fact, they'll probably think you wise. But again, on the other hand, we can make the mistake of thinking that unless we are spotlessly flawless, we're not worthy to receive communion, and that, too, is a mistake the devil would love you to make. You see, being a child of the King doesn't mean that we don't sin and that we never fail. What it does mean is this: It means when we do fail, we are aware that we have sinned. Why? Because we have the Spirit of Christ that lives within us, and he convicts us. And so we grieve as children who know that we have a Father who longs to forgive us and cleanse us, because God says so in *1 John 1:9*, he says: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* So being a child of the King doesn't mean that we are without sin. What it means is that when we do sin, we understand we have an advocate with the Father, someone who speaks on our behalf. *1 John 2:1* says: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* You

see, because it is the fact that we have Jesus Christ's righteousness and not our own, we are therefore free to eat from his table. And so if you love your Lord, don't deny yourself the privilege that Jesus has purchased for you.

Jesus lived the life we were supposed to live and then he died the death we all deserved to die in our place so that we could be made worthy for heaven, so that we could participate in this feast right now. So take some time right now and thank God for his Holy Spirit who has opened up your eyes and mine. 1 Corinthians 11, verses 23 and 24, it says this: *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* So take, and eat.

As the elders come forward to begin distributing the cup, again I'd like to focus on the last of the four parts that make up the presentation of the gospel. Again it's God, it's man, it's Christ, and it's a response. And it's here that the woman at the well and the unbelieving crowd, they take widely divergent paths. *John 4:28* says: *So the woman left her water jar and went away into the 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. John 8:59 says: *So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.*

So here's my question. Was the path of one of these a success and the other a failure? Was God glorified any less by the woman at the well's glorious salvation than he was by a near murderous rejection by the unbelieving crowd? The answer is no. And how we understand this can fundamentally alter the way we understand presenting the gospel. You see, many of us are familiar with Isaiah 55 which says this: *"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve that purpose for which I sent it."* Now I've heard that scripture quoted very often but I often hear only a part of it. *So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to my void, or empty.* And you know for years and years I understood that scripture to mean that God's word will always be moving someone forward towards accepting the gospel. But that's not what it says. You see, there's a reason why God's word will never return void or empty, and it's stated in the second part of that very sentence. Let me read it again. This is verse 11. It says: *So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me*

*empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."* You see, those words are revolutionary. You see, God was equally glorified by the woman at the well and by that murderous crowd. In both cases the word that proceeded from Christ's mouth accomplished what God desired and achieved the purpose for which he sent it. You see, in the case of the woman at the well, the mercy of God was gloriously set out and it was gloriously accomplished. And in the case of the murderous crowd, the justice of God was gloriously set out and it was also gloriously accomplished. You see, in the end what mattered most to Christ was the glory of God. And so regardless the outcome of a faithful presentation of the gospel, God's justice or God's mercy will be glorified. God's words will never return empty. And in both cases, Jesus was triumphant.

And now when Jesus ascended into heaven, that task that he had become ours as well. *2 Corinthians 2:14* says this: *But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?* As I said, every single time the gospel is properly presented, it will move its

hearers in either of two directions. It will move them either into light and life or it will move them into death and darkness. The woman at the well, she moved into light and life upon hearing the gospel. The mere believers of John 8 heard the exact same gospel and moved instead into darkness and death. Jesus told them the same gospel story. He told them about God as his heavenly father, he told them about fallen man's desperate need for a savior, he told them that he indeed was the God man Christ, the savior, and that the secret to eternal life was responding to his call. You see, a faithful presentation of the gospel always involves those four parts, three of which are up to us, one of which is up to him. The parts that we are responsible for is God, man, Christ. And accurately presenting it will be to some the sweet smell of life itself, and God's mercy will be glorified. To others it will be the absolute stench of death, but God's justice will be glorified. And here's the key to understanding this. It's this little sentence that ends *2 Corinthians 2:16*, it says: *Who is sufficient for these things?* You know what God's saying here? What he's saying is that we are not capable of determining who is who in God's grand scheme of things. Who is sufficient for these things? God alone. You see, we don't determine who responds to the gospel one way or another, but God does.

You know, when I look back at my own personal history, and I

remember the first three people who told me the gospel story, and they told me God, man, Christ, and you know what they got back from me? What they got back from me was the stench of death. You know, to two of them I was at least polite, but I was very firm in saying your gospel is absolute nonsense. The third one was a friend, and so to his presentation I added mockery and laughter. So three different people presented to me God, man, Christ and received from me the stench of death. And then one day by God's mercy, my eyes were opened and that fourth person's presentation of the very same gospel, it became the sweet smell of life itself. And who was sufficient for that? God alone.

What does this mean to me about how I present the gospel? Well, it means, first of all, that I am liberated from the role of a salesman trying to put the best face on a product that I'm trying to sell. Instead I realize I've been given the role of an ambassador whose job is only to accurately present the facts about my king and his kingdom. God, man, Christ; that's up to me. The response is up to Him. Paul says in the very next verse: *We are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.* So that's the question. The question is do we speak in Christ? Have we accepted our role as Christ's ambassadors? Is the gospel we present the sweet savor of life itself or the very stench of death

itself? That's what an accurate presentation of the gospel is: God, man, Christ, response. To the woman at the well it was the sweet smell of life itself, and she instantly began spreading that aroma. To the unbelieving crowd, that same gospel was the stench of death, and it had them picking up rocks to stone him. But here's the part that we won't learn till we get to heaven. It's a really neat part. There very well may have been in that crowd of men and women, people who had rocks in their hands ready to hurl at Jesus who are now in heaven because someone some time later presented the gospel of life, and what started out as death became life. That's what we need to consider the next time we're ready to write somebody off as impossible. That's what we need to consider the next time we grow fearful about presenting the gospel. Who is sufficient for this? God alone. Take a moment to think on that.

1 Corinthians, the 11th chapter, the 25th verse says this: *In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."* So take, and drink.

This is our heads, hands, and feet part. This is the part where we actually try to flesh out what it means to remember Christ and his cross, and I want to talk a little bit about what happened in Arizona this week. First of all, I want to say that when it comes

to the press, I think we all know that perception is reality. It's not who or what someone or something actually is that matters, it's what people perceive about it, and you know, that applies doubly so to how we present the gospel. *1 Peter 3:15* says this: *Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.* I was at the pregnancy center on Thursday and I just say that because the folks there are obviously fairly conservative people. And we were having a conversation about what had taken place in Arizona. For those of you who don't know, there was a bill supporting the protection of religious rights, the rights of people who for conscience sake could not go along with certain things. There was a bill that had been floated to protect those rights, and it was vetoed by the Governor of Arizona, Governor Brewer. So we were talking about that and I was saying how disappointed I was that the bill was vetoed. And a woman in the Center looked at me and she just started shaking her head, and she said, "I don't support that bill." And I said, "Really?" She said "No, I -- I think that veto was a good thing. In fact, I could never support that bill." And I said, "Why is that?" She said, "I just think it's wrong for a bill that would allow people to refuse service to gays in restaurants." I said, "Wait a second." I said, "Time out." I said, "What makes you think that's what that bill is all about?" I said, "First of all, I'm a Christian, I think it's wrong to refuse

to serve gays in a restaurant." I said, "If Jesus worked in a restaurant, he would serve gays." I said, "Jesus wants us to do the very best that we can to serve gays because they're part of this community of sinners that we're all part of. Where in the world did you get that from that bill?" Now, there are a dozens and dozens of examples out there, I just used two of them to explain to this woman what the bill was all about. I said to her, "Do you think it would be right for the government to force a Jewish Holocaust survivor to make pulled pork sandwiches for a Neo-Nazi picnic?" That's kind of extreme and nobody's saying that they're doing that. Another example I gave from the other side is I'm sure you're all familiar with Westboro Baptist Church, this is a church that's made an industry out of hating on homosexuals. I said, "What if a gay photographer was forced by the government to go take pictures of Westboro Baptist's picnic?" Because that's what that bill is designed to prevent. But you wouldn't know that. You wouldn't know that if you listened to what the press had to say. According to the Alliance Defending Freedom, let me just read you their quote: SB 1062 merely clarifies Arizona's existing law to protect Arizonans from any attempt by the government to force them to speak or act in ways that violate their religious beliefs. It safeguards freedom by closing loopholes that would have allowed other state governments to punish private citizens for living and working according to their convictions.

I'm sure you've heard about this, there was a couple who refused to make a wedding cake for a homosexual marriage. They were driven out of business. They were fined thousands of dollars. And in another case there was a photographer who was required to put together a storybook for another marriage that he refused on the basis of conscience. In some cases these people were facing jail sentences, believe it or not. But there is so much misinformation and misunderstanding about this bill and there's also a great deal of misunderstanding and misinformation about what the issue of Christians and homosexuality and gay marriage is all about, so much so that last Wednesday I canceled our regular class and we spent an hour going over the biblical understanding of how we Christians are to project the love of Christ into this world when it comes to the issue of homosexuality and gay marriage. You see, this is an area that requires a great deal of personal wisdom when it comes to addressing those issues. And I got a call from somebody after the class who said it was extremely helpful, and she had hoped that I would do more. And I spoke to someone again this morning who said it was also extremely helpful. So I'm just using this to advertise, I'm going to repeat and expand the class next Wednesday, because we have an obligation to love our brothers and sisters who are caught up in any sin, whatever it is, from homosexuality to any other type of sin. And we also have an obligation to give an

account for the hope that is within us, and the Bible gives us the ability to do both. But you have to show up on Wednesday to find out how. See, we are called on to project and to spell out the gospel in terms of God, man, Christ, response. And because the enemy so desperately wants to silence that message, issues like this, they don't even get a hearing. And to those outside the kingdom, we have the task of presenting this gospel, and it's very hard to present a gospel to somebody who comes into the transaction thinking already you're a hater and a bigot. We have to spend time understanding what the scriptures have to say, understanding how the love of Christ applies within and without the homosexual community, what our responsibility is to serve them, what our responsibility is to love them, what our responsibility is to Christ and kingdom, and how we work that out. So I would encourage you to come Wednesday night. We'll be talking about that. Let's pray.

*Father God, I do thank you for your word, I thank you for your gospel. I thank you that God, man, Christ is our business; response is your business. And Father, I just thank you for the gift that each of us have received, being moved by your Holy Spirit to take what could be the stench of death and hear it and see it and understand it and smell it as the sweet aroma of life. We thank you for that gift. We just pray, Lord, and understand that*

*we are ambassadors who have a responsibility to pass on the information, pass on the gospel, and you have the responsibility of deciding what to do with it. Give us the strength, give us the wisdom, give us the courage to do just that, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*