

Sermon outline and notes:

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Swift Creek Baptist Church, 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834

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## John 4:31-39 “How & Why We Seek to Win Souls”

Intro. This morning I want to share a message about what we have traditionally called “soul winning.” That terminology is based on Prov. 11:30, “he who wins souls is wise.”<sup>1</sup> Today’s message is about sharing the gospel with an individual or small group. John chapter 4 tells us of one of the classic examples of personal soul winning. Jesus initiated a conversation with a Samaritan woman, turned the conversation to spiritual truth and her deep need, and eventually led her to believe in Him as Savior. What a joy Jesus felt when He helped turn her life around. And what joy Jesus felt as He saw a multitude coming from the Samaritan village, wanting to know more about Him. I want you to feel the heart of Jesus on this issue. I hope that you will be led of God to make a new commitment to the soul-winning ministry of the Lord.

This is a message that is badly needed today. In 2013 it was reported that annual baptisms in Southern Baptist churches have declined by 100,000 in the previous 12 years, dropping to the smallest number in 64 years, in spite of a growing population in that same time period. Much of this reflects a decline in Christian influence in our culture. Unbelievers are less likely to attend our churches, especially without a direct invitation. At least some of this decline reflects a change in emphasis in our churches. We used to emphasize evangelism more than we do now. Thom Rainer, president of LifeWay Christian Resources, contends in his new book *I Am a Church Member* that evangelicals have shifted toward a “me first” rather than “others first” attitude. As a result, in 2012 it took 50 church members to lead to the baptism of one person, whereas in 1935 the ratio was 20/1.<sup>2</sup> Think of what could happen if each member won just 1 person/year to Christ! Yet, the problem is that nearly 80% of Southern Baptists have *never* shared their faith or their Christian testimony with someone (Illus.#C-255). A 2002 opinion poll may explain why the problem may be getting worse. In that poll, 71 percent said that we should be tolerant of people of other faiths and “leave them alone.”<sup>3</sup> That means that 71 percent of Americans believe it is *wrong* to share your faith and seek to win someone to faith in Jesus!

Well, the need is great, so let’s see what Jesus says about this issue. First of all, in this text we can see:

### I. JESUS’ CALL FOR SOUL WINNERS

This call is not explicit here, but the whole text makes it clear that Jesus is calling for His followers to both sow and reap a harvest of souls unto eternal life. Now there are at least two reasons why we know that we are all called to be soul winners:

A. Because It Is the Will of God – Jesus was the Master soul winner, and here is why. He said to His disciples in v.34, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His

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<sup>1</sup> Though the meaning of this verse may actually be “he who takes souls is shrewd,” Danial 12:3 indicates that those who turn many to righteousness are wise (based on Hebrew poetic parallelism).

<sup>2</sup> baptistnews.com/2013/06/06/sbc-baptism-membership-numbers-fall/

<sup>3</sup> The poll was conducted as part of a joint project of the “Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly” television program and *U.S. News & World Report* magazine. The story appeared in *The Religious Herald*, 5/2/02 (C-391).

work.” As usual the disciples interpreted His statement literally, but Jesus was talking about food as an analogy of something spiritual. To understand His statement, we need to consider why we eat food. We eat food because it satisfies our hunger and satisfies our taste buds. It also gives us the energy we need. Even so, Jesus knew that doing the will of God, especially His will to save souls, was very satisfying. There is joy in doing the will of God. So He wanted to do the will of God even more than eat food! He also knew like food, we are energized as we do God’s will.

When I was a boy I loved to go out into the neighborhood to play with my friends. We would play in the woods and in the creek. My mama would ring a cow bell to call me to dinner, but I would rather play than eat. I guess that was one reason why I was so skinny!

Do you desire to do the will of God, even more than you desire food? That is only true if you find that doing the will of God is so satisfying and invigorating. I can tell you this. The only place of satisfaction, the only haven of happiness for the true child of God, is the will of God. Furthermore, the strongest Christians are those who do the will of God.

What is the will of God that Jesus has in mind here? Part of the answer is found in the way Jesus refers to His heavenly Father here. Jesus calls God “Him who sent Me.” God sent Jesus for a purpose, and that is found in the last of v.34, “to accomplish His work.”<sup>4</sup> And the context defines the work. It is to share the Word of God with people, and bring salvation to needy souls. At Gethsemane Jesus realized beyond doubt that the will of God was to die for our sins on a cross, in order to save us from our sins. Then, having made atonement for sin on that cross, He cried out “It is finished!” He had fully done the will of God! Jesus understood that saving souls was God’s will. After all, it is God’s will that people be saved from their sins. 2 Peter 3:9 says that “The Lord is ... not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” 1 Timothy 2:4 says that God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Now this mission was not limited to Jesus. The same will of God applied to His disciples. It is clear from the context that Jesus calling His disciples to join him and the soul-winning ministry. Later in John 20:21 Jesus said to His disciples, “As the Father has sent Me, so send I you.” As Jesus labored in the fields to win souls, so His disciples were to labor in the fields to win souls.

Furthermore, this soul-winning ministry was not limited to the apostles. In Acts 8:4 it says, “Therefore those who were scattered [upon the persecution of Stephen] went everywhere preaching the word.” The word translated “preaching” (*euaggelizo*) actually simply means “to share the good news.” In the context (v.1), those who went forth sharing the gospel did not include the apostles. They stayed in Jerusalem. The early church understood that this call to become a soul winner was not limited to the apostles, but applied to every believer. So it is God’s will that His church go out into our communities, and tell others about salvation in Jesus Christ.

We should not only win souls because it is the will of God, but also:

B. Because of the Present Opportunity – Jesus said in v.35, “Do you not say, ‘There are still four months and then comes the harvest’? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!” In Israel Barley was harvested in April and wheat was harvested in May. Apparently Jesus was speaking to this woman in December or January. But there was another type of harvest that was already for reaping. When He says “white for harvest” He is alluding to the fact that the grain “whitens” or “lightens” from a darker color when it is ready for harvest. Possibly the Samaritans who had listened to the striking testimony of the woman now saved were on their way toward the well, dressed in Middle Eastern white garments, and pointing

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<sup>4</sup> See 5:30; 6:38; 7:18; 8:50; 9:4; 10:37-38; 12:49-50; 17:4.

to them the Savior said to the disciples, “Lift up your eyes....” Though the grain-harvest may still be four months off, the soul-harvest is ripe for the plucking even now! Many souls were ready to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Yet the last thing on these disciples’ minds was the possibility that the Samaritans would believe in Jesus.

What Jesus says about the Samaritans is true today. Don’t underestimate the potential of reaching unbelievers for Christ. I read some time ago that ¼ of all unchurched people said they would attend a church if they were just invited.<sup>5</sup> That would especially be true if they were invited by a friend, co-worker, or family member. There are men and women everywhere, thirsty for living water, and just waiting for someone to take that opportunity to give them that living water. The opportunity is even greater on the international mission field. Our church will even pay most of your way to the mission field, if you will just be willing to go for a short or long-term trip.

This was plainly a rebuke to the disciples. You see, there was a problem. The problem was not with the ripeness of the fields; it was the blindness of the farmers. That is why Jesus said, “Lift up your eyes and look at the fields.” You see, the disciples regarded Samaria as a most unlikely and undesirable field for a harvest; at best much sowing would be required, and then a long wait, before any ripened grain could be expected. But Jesus says they are already ripe unto harvest! The woman at the well was ready to accept Christ when given the opportunity. Many of the people in her village were likewise ready.

I read about a sales manager who called his salesmen together to try to encourage them to have a greater vision for their company. He had a big white poster board set up in the conference room, and in the middle of that poster board he had drawn a black circle about the size of a quarter. He asked each one of his salesmen to tell him what they saw on that poster. Well, the first one said, “I see a black dot.” The second one said, “I see a black dot.” The third one said, “I see a black dot.” All thirty-five sales people in that room said the same thing, “I see a black dot.”<sup>6</sup> The sales manager looked at them for a moment and then said, “Isn’t it strange that all of you saw the black dot, but none of you saw the white all around it.” [Illus.#C-2681]

Oh Christian, listen to Jesus when he says, “Lift up your eyes and look at the fields.” Mrs. School teacher: in your classroom do you see only students, or do you see fields that are white unto harvest? Mr. Businessman: do you see only employees, or do you see fields that are white unto harvest? Mr. Coach: do you see only athletes on your team, or do you see fields that are white for harvest? Miss student: do you see only classmates in your school, or do you see fields that are white unto harvest? If the fields were ripe then, how much more ripe are they now. Too often we do not recognize the good opportunity that we have to lead someone to Christ. Too often we assume that so and so wouldn’t be interested in hearing what we say about Christ. Or we think someone is a hopeless case, and that it would be useless to speak to them about Christ. And if we say nothing, we will perhaps never know what seeds of Truth may have been planted in their hearts by the labors of someone else! Don’t assume that someone is not interested in hearing the gospel. For all you know, someone may have witnessed to them some time back, and they are ready to make a decision. Or they may have gone through a trial that has caused them to be open to spiritual things.

However, the opportunity may soon come to an end. When it comes to agriculture, there is a limited window of opportunity to harvest a crop. If the harvest is not gathered, the fruit will spoil. Once the fruit or grain has spoiled, the opportunity for the harvest is past. Even so, the present opportunity to lead souls to Christ may soon come to an end. I can think of at least three situations when the soul harvest is past: 1) Their Death. You never know when that day may come. 2)

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<sup>5</sup> George Barna, *The Frog in the Kettle* (Ventura, California: Regal, 1990), 41.

<sup>6</sup> Use visual aid and ask the audience the same thing?

Hardness of heart. They may become too hardened to the gospel to be saved. 3) The end times and the return of Christ. In John 9:4 Jesus said, "I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work." 2 Thess. 2:11-12 says that in the last days, unbelievers will receive "strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." Many prophecies are falling into place. We must win souls to Christ before it is too late. So take advantage of witnessing opportunities while the opportunity is still there.

## II. THE METHOD & PROCESS OF SOUL-WINNING

So indeed, the Lord has called His disciples and the rest of His people to the work of evangelism. He also knew that they needed some instruction regarding how to win souls. The disciples did eventually learn these truths, for they were used of God to bring salvation to literally thousands of people.

So notice what is involved in winning souls to Christ. He draws an analogy from nature:

A. We Must Sow the Seed – Jesus says in vv.36-37, "And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this the saying is true: 'One sows and another reaps.'" In Luke 8:11, in explaining a parable, Jesus said, "The seed is the word of God." Here Jesus uses that same analogy, likening the word of God to seed that must be planted in the heart. God has chosen this method throughout the age. It is the personal testimony of believers and the sharing of the Word of God that are the divinely appointed means for the spread of Christianity. Islamic religion has spread at the tip of a sword; Christianity has spread through the spiritual sword of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God! All across the land the Word of God is being sown in the hearts and lives of people. In Sunday School and Bible School classes the Word of God is being sown. In preaching services and on TV, radio & the Internet the Word is being preached. Through personal witnessing some are hearing the Word, perhaps for the first time. Others plant seeds in hearts by sharing their personal testimony. We are going to have our annual Ladies Testimony Night on May 22. Invite others to hear these testimonies from Ashley Elder and Nancy Vance. Some are receiving the Gospel through tracts and Bible distributions. By the way, the tracks on display in the hallway are available for you to use. John Albert joined the Gideons, and they go out distributing Bibles. They are planting seeds. These are the means that God has chosen. Rom. 10:13-14 says, "For whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard?"

So let us sow the seed of the Word of God into the hearts of people. That is absolutely necessary if people are going to find new life in Christ.

But some may say, "I do not know enough to be a soul winner." Even though I would encourage witness training, it is not required. I only need to point out in v.29 that the woman at the well became a soul-winner immediately after her conversion. Notice what it says, "Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" She didn't know much, but she did know Jesus! It's not *what* you know but *who* you know that counts. All she did was share her testimony. You can just say to someone, "Come to my church and hear the message that has changed my life."

By the way, as we go forth to sow the seed of the Word of God, let us follow the example of Jesus, who did so in Samaria of all places. He crossed cultural and religious barriers. He did not

assume that they would not be receptive to a Jew. He told his disciples in Acts 1:8 that they were to be His witnesses not only in Jerusalem and Judea, but also in Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth. In the last of v.42, we read that the Samaritans recognized that Jesus is the Savior of *the World*. Therefore, we are to take the gospel to the world.

B. We Must Cultivate What Has Been Sown – When the farmer plants seed he ought to pray for rain. He also cultivates the plants for the next 2-4 months until he gets the harvest.

Even so, I believe evangelism, and a soul coming to Christ is a process. Very few come to Christ because of a single evangelism event. The harvest usually comes months initially after sowing the seed. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:6, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.” So don’t get discouraged when a presentation of the Gospel is initially rejected.

When I was 9 years old I was attending the Presbyterian Church with my parents, and I attended a Communicant’s Class. The pastor met with a group of children and younger youth. He shared the gospel and each of us was invited to trust in Jesus and become members of the church. I declined to do so at that time. It was not until 3 years later that I prayed to receive Christ as Savior.

One of the greatest personal soul winners I know is Emerson Lyle, former minister of evangelism at my home church. One time as I was visiting with him I asked, “How many have you won to faith in Christ the first time you witnessed to them?” He said, “Very few.” In most cases, he has talked to the person several times before they accept Christ.

So we need to pray for those who receive a witness, or who start coming to church, and engage in follow-up conversations over a period of time. It takes cultivation.

C. We Must Seek to Reap a Harvest – At the right time the harvest needs to be reaped or all the sowing and cultivation does not good. Jesus mentions “he who reaps” in v.36. He says in v.38, ““I sent you to reap....” Even so, we need to not only plant seeds of the gospel, and cultivate souls, but we must also attempt to reap the harvest. Too often all we do is plant seeds, and never get around to actually inviting someone to trust in Christ as their Savior.

Some are gifted of God to be able to help a person make the decision to trust in Christ as Savior. That is one reason we have evangelists come to our church from time to time. You see, hearing the Gospel is not enough. A person must enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Notice in v.42 what the Samaritan converts said to the woman, “Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.” Jesus must not be someone you have simply heard about. Nor is believing with your head enough. You must become personally convinced of who Jesus is, and what He can do for you. Then, by genuine faith, you must trust in Him, and invite Him into your heart through prayer.

So we must not only share the gospel, but ask the person to respond with repentance and faith.

Why should we be a part of evangelistic sowing and reaping? Consider with me last of all:

### III. THE REWARDS OF THE SOUL-WINNER:

Why does the farmer work hard, sowing & reaping? Does he do so just for the fun of it? No! He does so because he anticipates a harvest, which will be the reward of his labor. So if you will heed the call to become a soul winner, you will also be rewarded. Jesus said in v.36, “And he who reaps receives wages....” In Rev. 22:12 Jesus promised, “And behold, I am coming quickly,

and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work.” What kind of rewards can be expect? We will enjoy the following blessings and rewards:

A. Spiritual Satisfaction - When the disciples returned to Jesus, they encouraged him to eat. He responded by saying in v.32, “I have food to eat of which you do not know.” Of course, even though the disciples interpreted His word literally, as v.33 indicates, Jesus was speaking figuratively. Just as food brings satisfaction, even so doing the will of God by winning souls brings spiritual satisfaction. In dispensing spiritual blessing to others, one is blessed himself. What a blessing it is to have a part in the salvation of a soul. If you teach Sunday School or AWANA and one of your students gets saved, you have the satisfaction in knowing that you had a part in it. If you invite someone to church, and they hear the gospel and become a believer, you have the satisfaction in knowing that you had a part in their salvation.

Imagine that when you get to heaven someday, someone comes up to you and thanks you for having a part in their coming to Christ. What a satisfying reward that will be? Perhaps you shared a tract. Perhaps you shared your testimony. Perhaps you shared a personal witness. Perhaps you gave to support the work of a missionary. Yet I’m afraid that too many believers will not experience that joy. Will you have children, grandchildren, or a spouse who will come up to you and thank you for praying for them, and having a part in leading them to Christ?

B. Eternal Fruit - Jesus also said in v.36, “And he who reaps ... gathers fruit for eternal life...” Jesus said this fruit is “for eternal life,” literally gathering fruit into (*eis*) eternal life. Every time you share the gospel and someone receives Jesus Christ, you have put eternal fruit into God’s storehouse. We should be encouraged and motivated to enter into the task of soul-winning, because the reward is an eternal one, for not only do those saved through the labors of the reaper receive eternal life, but because of this the joy of both will be eternal too. Many people work hard at the job, and in secular clubs, but generally speaking, such work as no eternal significance. But when you work for Jesus winning souls, you are engaging in a work that has eternal significance.

Now because of all the rewards that I have talked about, we will experience another reward:

C. Joy & Rejoicing – Jesus said in the last of v.36, “that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together.” In that day especially, sometimes those who do the preparatory work are not the same as those who harvest. In fact, Christ says in v.37, “For in this the saying is true: ‘One sows and another reaps.’”

Even so, someone may sow the gospel seed while another reaps the harvest later on. But even if the sower never knows about a conversion in this life, what a joyful time it will be in heaven when he meets that person he witnessed to! In 1 Thess. 2:19 Paul said, “For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?” In Phil. 4:1 Paul called the believers there, whom he had won to the Lord, “my joy and crown.” He is using the analogy of the victor’s crown given to the winner of the athletic games as a reward. The recipient had great joy. Some of the most joyful Christians are those who win others to Christ. Have you ever had the joy of leading someone to Jesus? That is one of the most joyful experiences of all. By the way, we know the angels in heaven also rejoice over one sinner that repents (Luke 15:10).

Conclusion: One of the greatest Baptist preachers in England during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a man named Francis Dixon. Francis Dixon had a young man in his church whose name was Peter. He

asked Peter to share his testimony of how he became a Christian. He stood up and said, “I was in the royal navy stationed in Sydney, Australia. I was walking down George Street, when out of nowhere came a little old white-haired man. He said to me, “Excuse me, sir, I would like to ask you a question. I hope it won’t offend you, but tell me, if you were to die today, where would you be in eternity? The Bible says it will either be in heaven or in hell, one of the two. Think about it, would you please? That’s all, sir, God bless you, and too-dleooo.” Peter said, “I had never had anybody ask me that question before, and it so burdened me that when I got back to England, the first thing I did was to seek out a pastor and gave my heart to Christ.” As it turns out, over time Dr. Dixon heard a similar testimony from several others, even in different parts of the world where he traveled. Finally, he traveled to Australia to seek out that man. Finding him, he told him about the testimonies of salvation he had heard from so many. That dear little old man broke down, wept with joy, and said, “Sir, this is the first time in my life I’ve ever known of anybody coming to Christ through my witness!” That white-haired man did not see any of the people he witnessed to saved. He just planted a seed, which only later was harvested unto eternal life.

How are you going to respond to the call of Jesus to win souls? Do you sense His heartbeat for winning lost souls to repentance and faith? Will you teach a study school class? Will you teach Vacation Bible school this summer? Will you sign up for witness training when we offer it? I know there are some here today who used to witness, but you haven’t done so in some time now. Will you recommit to being a soul winner? Parents, would you do all you can to lead your children to faith in Christ? How about your grandchildren? Another way to respond is to make a commitment to be more active inviting others to church. The woman at the well said, “Come and see....” You can do the same. Invite others to our Ladies’ Testimony night on the evening of the 22<sup>nd</sup>.

Finally, there are probably some here today who need to turn from sin and turn to Christ in faith. You have known about Jesus for some time now. You know what he did for you on the cross. It’s time for the harvest to take place! What a joy it would be for us here today to see you walk this aisle and trust Jesus as your Savior!

Sources: Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1982); Dr. James Merritt (notes from his sermon on this text entitled, “The Love of the Harvest”); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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