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## **CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE FOUR GOSPELS**

### **UNIT 9: THE CONVERSATIONS OF JESUS**

In the previous unit we studied some of the key teachings of Jesus as given in the sermons and monologues found in the four gospels. In this unit we will look at another aspect of Jesus' interaction that is far less often considered – his conversations with others.

#### **BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:**

All the gospels record conversations of Jesus, but not equally. Mark's account records only a few of Jesus' dialogues, as it focuses more on the actions and events of his ministry. Matthew and Luke both record a number of Jesus' conversations, but the Gospel of John includes far more dialogues than all the other accounts of Jesus' life. As a result, while in this unit we draw some examples from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), many come from John.

Interestingly, few of Jesus' conversations are recorded in more than one gospel, though there are some cases of this, such as Jesus' discussion with a rich young ruler which is recorded both by Matthew (19:16–26) and Mark (10:17–27). This lack of duplication is probably because the gospel writers chose to record only conversations that tied to the particular themes they were stressing in their accounts (see "Perspectives and Themes of the Gospels" in Unit 2 of this course).

There are no "casual" conversations of Jesus recorded. The gospel writers all show that Jesus used his conversations with others to accomplish important goals: to instruct, guide, and on occasion to correct the ideas or perceptions of others. He consistently did this in a straightforward and helpful manner. For example, although his enemies frequently tried to trick Jesus with complex legal questions, his answers were direct and simple to understand. Jesus also used questions in teaching and working with others, but the questions he posed were never meant to confuse those with whom he spoke. Rather, the questions Jesus asked were a fundamental part of his working with them for their own good.

#### **The Questions of Jesus**

When we look closely at Jesus' interaction with others, we see that he frequently challenged his hearers with questions of various types. The questions he asked were always designed to help his hearers to assess situations in an effective and proper manner and to reach the right conclusions themselves whenever possible. This is especially true of the most frequent type of question Jesus asked others – the "Why?" questions he asked to encourage them to examine themselves. Rather than confrontationally accusing those with whom he spoke, he encouraged them to judge their own situations, as we see in the following examples:

Jesus said, “Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?” (Matthew 9:4)

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone.” (Mark 10:18)

He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?” (Luke 24:38)

“Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don’t you believe me?” (John 8:46)

The only exceptions to this principle teach us an important lesson. Although Jesus asked many such “Why?” questions when speaking directly to individuals or groups, he avoided asking “Why?” in situations that might encourage his hearers to judge others. In these situations, Jesus framed his questions differently and let his hearers produce answers that would apply as much to themselves as to others. We see a clear example of this in Luke’s Gospel which reports that when Jesus performed a miracle, healing ten lepers, and only one returned to give thanks, Jesus asked “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?” (Luke 17:17). Notice Jesus did not ask *why* the nine went away without expressing gratitude – and thus possibly incite judgmental responses such as “because they are ungrateful individuals!” In this instance, he asked instead “Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” (vs. 18).

Similarly, Jesus sometimes responded to questions with a story, followed by questions that he then would ask. In this way he encouraged his listeners to think about the context of their questions and how best to frame them. He often guided conversations by giving specific, contextualized examples to which his hearers could relate. The characters depicted in the stories he told thus often provided the answers to the questions he had been asked.

It is also important to see that the questions Jesus asked others regarding the stories and parables he gave them in response to their own questions were not regarding general principles beyond the stories themselves. In other words, Jesus did not ask those with whom he conversed to jump to conclusions or make their own inferences, and especially not to bring their own feelings and emotions into the picture. Just as he taught with authority (Matthew 7:29; etc.), Jesus spoke with certainty (see Note 1).

As a result, Jesus never asked his disciples or others “What did you learn from this parable?” or “What do you think about that answer?” Instead, he helped them find the truth within what he had said, then challenged them to put the truth into action – to apply what they had learned. That is why we so frequently find that the recorded conversations of Jesus end with the word “Go!”: “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37); “Go and sin no more” (John 5:14 NKJV); “Go and tell others” (Luke 8:39 paraphrased); etc.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:**

There are far more of Jesus’ conversations recorded in the gospels than can be individually studied here, but in this section we will look at three examples from the Gospel of John that show a broad range of dialogue types before drawing lessons from these conversations in the final section.

### **Nicodemus (John 3:1–21)**

John’s Gospel tells us that Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee who was a member of the Sanhedrin ruling council, came to Jesus at night in order to question him about his teachings. Nicodemus probably went to Jesus under the cover of darkness (vs. 2) so as not to be seen in public with the controversial teacher. John’s record of the conversation shows us that the Pharisee was beginning to believe the truth, but that he may have held back because of the opinions of his fellow Pharisees. In this conversation Jesus cut directly to the main point that Nicodemus needed to understand regarding our need for a new nature:

“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. (John 3:3–6)

To understand this passage, we must realize that when Jesus said we must be “born again” (vs. 3), the Greek word translated “again” has two possible meanings: the first one is “again,” and the second one is “from above.” Nicodemus clearly understood the statement as meaning born “again” and questioned Jesus about the possibility of this, while Jesus stressed instead the meaning of being born “from above” – by the Spirit of God (vs. 6). When Jesus said we must be born “of water and the Spirit,” he is undoubtedly referencing the outward sign of baptism and the inner presence of the Spirit of God, just as the apostle Paul later tells us, “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5).

But Jesus chides Nicodemus in John 3:10: “You are Israel’s teacher ... and do you not understand these things?” This certainly implies that what Jesus had said was something Nicodemus should have understood from the Old Testament. As a teacher of the Hebrew Scriptures, Nicodemus should have known that a time was coming in which God promised: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean ... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you” (Ezekiel 36:25–26). If Nicodemus had understood these verses, he would not have questioned Jesus’ words about being born again any more than he would have questioned God’s promise to give his people “a new heart.”

#### **The Samaritan Woman (John 4:4–42).**

The conversation between Jesus and the woman he met at a well in the town of Sychar in Samaria is the longest recorded dialogue in the Gospel of John and in the New Testament. But the woman is unnamed and could be said to represent many of the lowest members of society. She was a female in a society where women were generally disadvantaged; as a Samaritan she was a member of a race despised by many Jews; and as a woman living with a man to whom she was not married she was doubtless a social outcast among her own people – as we see in the fact that she was drawing water alone in the heat of the day rather than in the cool of the early morning when other women doubtless normally did (vs.6).

The conversation begins with Jesus asking the woman for a drink of water and the woman reacting in surprise at being asked this by a Jew. But Jesus carries the conversation forward by skillfully ignoring the parts of her answers that would lead to argument (a tactic from which we can all learn) and responding instead to things the woman said that could be developed in the direction Jesus wanted the conversation to go. This was a conversational technique often used by Jesus and was particularly effective in this case.

When Jesus summarizes the details of her past relationships, the woman immediately understood that he was a prophet and took the theological slant of their discussion a step further by asking him about the proper place for worship – a point of major disagreement between Jews and Samaritans. In reply, Jesus jumped over this difference between the two groups and spoke of a coming time when people will worship God not in a particular place, but “in the Spirit and in truth” (4:23–24). We see Jesus’ conversational skill and the woman’s resultant growth in understanding during this encounter by noting her three statements regarding Jesus: first, “How can you [a Jew] ask me for a drink?” (vs. 9); second, “Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us the well?” (vs. 12); and third, “I can see that you are a prophet” (vs. 19). The conversation then ended with an expression of expectant faith by the woman: “I know that Messiah ... is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” To which Jesus replied, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” (vss. 25–26).

John mentions that the woman then left her water jar, just as the disciples left their nets when called, becoming the first evangelist to her community (vss. 28–29), and the first female to be so portrayed in the New Testament. The reaction of this Samaritan woman stands in sharp contrast to the response to Jesus by the religious authorities of his own people in Jerusalem.

### **The Jewish Authorities (John 8:12–59)**

On an occasion when Jesus was teaching the people in the temple courts, he declared “I am the light of the world,” and the Pharisees challenged him saying “Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid” (John 8:13). Jesus answered that “In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is true. I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me” (vss. 17-18). This began a long conversation in which the Pharisees asked Jesus where his Father was (hoping to trap him into saying his Father was in heaven). Jesus refused to take their bait and answered, “You do not know me or my Father ...If you knew me, you would know my Father also” (vs. 19). The Pharisees persisted, however, and the conversation reached its climax when they intimated their own righteousness by claiming that Abraham was their father, and Jesus replied:

“If you were Abraham’s children ... then you would do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the works of your own father.” “We are not illegitimate children,” they protested. “The only Father we have is God himself.” Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God... You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him.” (John 8:39–44)

A little later in the conversation the argumentative Pharisees picked up stones to kill Jesus and he slipped away through the temple crowds. But the story does not end at this point. John carefully describes – as the next thing he tells us – an event that tied directly to this conversation. Finding a blind man outside the temple, we are told that Jesus continued where he had left off, by saying:

“I am the light of the world.” After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. (John 9:5–7)

Notice Jesus said “I am the light of the world” – repeating exactly what he had said immediately before the Pharisees challenged him in their conversation with him (John 8:12–13). In saying this he showed his action was a continuation of his earlier teaching, and John stresses that it was immediately after repeating “I am the light of the world” that Jesus used his saliva to heal the man’s eyes. But what is the connection? In John 8:41 the Pharisees had openly insinuated that Jesus was illegitimate (due to the – humanly-viewed – circumstances of his birth). Jesus’ actions tied directly to this.

Saliva was widely believed to have healing properties in the ancient world, so it is perhaps not surprising that the Jews had a tradition that the saliva of a legitimate, firstborn heir could have healing properties against several infirmities – including blindness (Talmud, Bava Batra 126b). Given these beliefs in the healing properties of saliva, the question of Jesus’ legitimacy and sonship found in the conversation with the Pharisees in John 8 suggests that it was this issue that was the specific background for the way Jesus conducted the healing in chapter 9. By using saliva in this healing, Jesus demonstrated that he was indeed a legitimate and firstborn son - the Firstborn Son of God.

## CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS:

The conversations of Jesus recorded in the gospels can often be seen to be interconnected in some way because the gospel writers carefully chose them not at random, but in order to make comparisons, contrasts, and to teach lessons (see Note 2). For example, the stories of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman that are told back-to-back in the book of John have interesting points of contact. While they may seem very different on the surface, both stories tell of conversations between Jesus and individuals who came alone to him.

While Nicodemus sought Jesus out in the dark of night and the Samaritan woman approached him under the blazing sun at noon, both were apparently avoiding others – both evidently feared public opinion and sought to avoid those who might look down on them (see Note 3). While Nicodemus was a respected member of the privileged religious elite in the Judean capital of Jerusalem, the Samaritan woman was a shamed individual from a despised culture in a relative backwater of the country; but they both displayed spiritual need and Jesus treated them equally. Nicodemus may have needed help to see his own sinful nature and the Samaritan woman may have needed help to see her worth, but the two individuals were alike in their apparent sensitivity to the opinions of others – and as a result of their conversations with Christ, both recognized that Jesus had something they needed.

It is unlikely that John juxtaposed his accounts of these individuals in the way he did without intending his readers to see the connection of fear that is implied in both stories. Whatever our background, whatever our own perception of our standing before God, we may suffer from an inherent human fear of the opinions of others. But after meeting with the One they came to see was the Messiah, both individuals found the courage to act without shame and without cover. Nicodemus later spoke with courage to remind his colleagues in the Sanhedrin that a person should be heard before being judged (John 7:50–51), and then, after the crucifixion, helped to prepare the body of the executed Jesus for burial (John 19:39–42). In the same way, after meeting Jesus, the Samaritan woman – if she had been avoiding her neighbors – now found the courage to tell them all about the One she had met who was the Christ (John 4:29). We may not be in the same situation as Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman, but like them, if we have met with Jesus in our lives, we can be strengthened to live without undue concern for the opinions of others.

This is only a single small example, but it is important to remember that a good number of the conversations recorded in the New Testament can be compared in the same way to see lessons that the gospel writers may well have intentionally included in their narratives. The three conversations from the Gospel of John examined in this unit show this in the way they record how Jesus engaged differently with individuals at different points on the spectrum of knowledge and faith. With the story of Nicodemus, we see Jesus working with an individual who had religious knowledge but only a little understanding – and yet who was questioning and teachable. With the Samaritan woman we see someone who was not outwardly religious or looking for answers, yet who was open and receptive to truth when it came to her. Both of these individuals contrast strongly with the religious authorities who felt they knew much, but who continually rejected the truth when it was made available to them. By including conversations like these in his account, John helps us see the reasons for Jesus' words of mercy to some, and judgment to others.

Throughout the gospels, the dialogues of Jesus reveal him as a skilled conversationalist who was able to question (see Note 4) and interact with people of many types and to provide an effective witness to them all. As a result, we can learn much from the conversations recorded in the gospels by keeping in mind the background of the individuals who spoke with Christ and noticing how he worked with them.

\* Note 1: The certainty of Christ's speech is underscored in the gospels' recording of Jesus saying "truly" (literally, "Amen") and – as we see in the Gospel of John – "Very truly" (literally, "Amen, amen") on a great many occasions. Jesus is quoted as saying "Very truly" some 26 times in John's Gospel alone.

\* Note 2: As Edward W. Klink writes in his commentary on John: "Unfortunately, interpreters have minimized the functional importance of the dialogues of Jesus in the narrative of the Gospel and have, therefore, misjudged their important role in directing and establishing the theology of the Gospel" (*Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, 2017, p.53).

\* Note 3: While it is sometimes said that the "heavy responsibilities" of Nicodemus may have prompted him to visit Jesus at night, this is unlikely as the timing would hardly have been mentioned if it were just one of convenience of scheduling. As this is one of only a very few records of conversations of Jesus specifically said to have been at nighttime, we may presume there was a reason for its mention.

\* Note 4: Careful study of the way Jesus asked questions in his conversations can be instructive. Interestingly, the simpler the question he asked, the deeper and more profound the answer he was indicating usually was.

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**REVIEW AND REFLECTION:** (complete in your notebook)

**Basics:**

Make a list – based on the dialogues discussed in this unit – of the ways Jesus used questions to help others in his conversations with them.

**Beneath the Surface:**

Read the account of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4:7–42) and ask yourself what you would have said to this person at each step of the conversation. What did you learn from this exercise?

**Everyday Applications:**

What important principles can we learn from the recorded conversations of Jesus that we can apply in our own lives?

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