

## Good News for the Obsessed

[John 4:1-42](#)

Good News for the Distressed

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Sunday, March 26, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

*Let us pray:* Our hearts hunger, our souls thirst, our minds desire to be in your presence. Gracious God and Creator, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, may your spirit now move us to embrace the truth of who you are, to satisfy the deepest yearnings of who you have made us to be. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A woman who lived her whole life in Michigan had moved to Texas. She became rather depressed about the barren landscape there. One hot morning she stood at her door, looking out over the bleak countryside and longing for the trees and rolling hills of Michigan. The postman arrived about that time and, seeing the distant look in her eyes, stood there with her in silence for a moment, looking out over the same countryside. And then, in an awed wonder of breath, said, "Beautiful view, ain't it? And not a tree to spoil the view, either."

We long for things that we miss. We long for things that we want. It is a deep sense of longing and hunger for life at its fullest that drives, often, the most luxurious parts of our lives. A recent book by Chandler Burr, called *The Emperor of Scent: A Story of Perfume, Obsession, and the Last Mystery of the Senses*, is about Luca Turin, who was the chief technical officer of Flexitral, in Chantilly, Virginia. He basically says that smell has to do with vibrations of molecules that touch sensors in the nose. We know when we like something because it vibrates our nose the right way. It is the vibration of waves for color that touches our eyes, our ears in terms of vibrations of sound, and now vibrations of scents. And as I remember the Beach Boys song, "Good Vibrations": She's sending me good vibrations, I'm picking up excitations. We love to be connected to things that make us feel good.

It is important to realize that those longings can turn to obsessions. Even with perfume titles, we sense that. "My Sin." My favorite, when my wife wears it, is "Opium." A certain addictive quality to that. And of course, the one most famous about this is "Obsession," by Calvin Klein, with the ad where a man and woman seem to be so obsessed with each other that they can pay no attention to anything else beside one another. To be obsessed is to literally become preoccupied, to sit before an object or a person, or to sit over against it: Obsession is to want to own it or get rid of it. To occupy a disproportionate reality in our minds from what it should have. A preoccupation with a person, a pattern, a thing, an event, a sense, a feeling, an act, an idea, a value. Something that drives us to excess. The words compulsion and addiction, codependency and dependent, are all interrelated with the concept of obsession. Life becomes imbalanced, destructive, habitual, and hurtful because we become obsessed with doing something or getting rid of something.

Whatever makes the adrenalin pump or the endorphins flow. I gotta have it, I gotta keep it, I gotta get rid of it, I gotta control it, I gotta deny it, I've gotta relive it, I've gotta make it happen, I've got enough of it, I've gotta feel it, experience it, avoid it, or obtain it. Obsession.

I believe that this event in the gospel of John is a lot about obsession. It is not just one kind of obsession, but, if you read the text through, there are at least seven or eight kinds of obsession that are referred to here. There's the obsession that human beings have around gender and sexuality. There is the reality that Jesus should not be at the well talking to a woman -- that's not acceptable in the Jewish culture. It is often believed that men who spend too much time talking to a woman will become clouded in their thinking and become obsessed by the woman. We all know that's true. The senses have gone wild. Another part of this obsession has to do with nationality. It was not good for Jewish people to talk to Samaritan people. There was an obsession that those two nations needed to be separate and distant from each other. Even though Jesus had to travel through Samaria, he wasn't supposed to talk with Samaritans because they were the

people who had been rejected by God. Those were those northerners who married those Assyrian foreigners under the Babylonian rule -- three strikes, and you're out. You do not want to hang out with Samaritans.

There is an obsession in the text with safety and security. The woman has five husbands -- she's had five husbands, and the man that she's currently living with is not her husband. Who knows why that's the case, but it is obvious that either through divorce or death, she has had a hunger to be secure. In those days, a woman had no financial abilities except being married. And it seems like she used all of her capacities to stay married at all costs. The town probably wondered about her; either she had five divorces and was on her sixth, or each one of the husbands had died, and in that case, who would want to marry the lady? The patterns of obsession also dealt with tribal ancestry. After all, this is the place of Jacob's well and Joseph's land. Everyone knows that tribe really counts in Jewish culture. Your family, blood ties, ancient connections, an obsession with the family and what the family means over and against all value systems.

There's also an obsession with place and worship styles here. There is a competitive relationship between Mount Gerizim and Mount Zion, between Jerusalem and Shekem. The northerners worshipped on the Mount Gerizim, and the southerners worshipped at the Mount Zion and the temple. And they did not trust each other's worship styles or plans or intentionalities. And this woman asked worship questions. It sounds a little bit like today's church: Do you worship in the classical tradition, or do you worship in the contemporary style? You may have to choose which area of value system you are committed to, and often we throw rocks at the opposite value system.

There's also an obsession here about food and water. The whole thing is built around the idea that the woman is drawing water because she has a deep need for water, and Jesus is thirsty, he wants some water. And Jesus is also hungry -- the disciples have gone to town to buy some food. There is a tremendous hunger for water and food here, an awareness that we can become very preoccupied when we're thirsty and hungry for those things that will feed us. This also has to do with the things that feed us in terms of other senses: our eyes and our ears, our tastes. It has become evident that March Madness has become exactly that for a lot of people, who are addicted to basketball game after basketball game after basketball game. Some people believe that people have watched so much basketball that they will age enough to start dribbling themselves.

Addicted by worship and place, worship wars. Addicted by those who want to be successful. Obsession with the sowing and reaping processes of life. Jesus calls attention to those who sow and reap, those who farm and harvest. Isn't our American pattern of live all about sowing and reaping? If you work hard enough, you will have gains that are big enough, you will accumulate wealth that is extravagant enough, and we all hunger to have enough money. I've yet to talk with a young couple that believes that they have enough money to get married. An obsession by having enough of our life together before we get married. So we work, we have ambition. We're obsessed with success.

There's also an awareness of obsession by a personality and charisma here. The woman becomes fascinated with Jesus because Jesus is able to tell her things about herself that nobody else understands. And then she goes to town to tell the townspeople, and they become fascinated with her story and the wonder of her transformation. And that obsession with a person's personality and charisma is an American pattern of life. *The Addictive Organization*, a book written about what happens when businesses have leaders who become so obsessed about winning and being successful. Americans like obsessive-compulsive, addictive personalities to lead organizations because they make money. We don't want losers to be the head of organizations; that's bad for Wall Street. Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, makes a clear statement about the kinds of leaders that are short-term winners in organizations are the people who call all the attention to themselves. But the better leaders, the long-term leaders, are the leaders that call attention to the values of the organization and empower people to take responsibility. American addiction to leadership with charisma haunts us in presidencies and pulpits.

We all know that obsession that leads to addiction can only be handled one way. That is, to recognize that there is an addiction. To recognize that we are powerless over that addiction, and that we need a higher power, a stronger presence, to help us refocus our lives because we've become obsessed about the wrong thing. We need a new habit. We need a habit that is a discipline, that helps us pay attention to the right

presence rather than the wrong product. We need to repair brokenness in our lives because the deep hungers that we have cannot be met by cars, by houses, by money. The whole point of this text is that the woman comes to grips with the deepest hunger in her life. And that's the God who is in Jesus. The good news in this text is clear: that every yearning, thirst, desire, and hunger that we have is a sign of a deeper reality that haunts every human being. We hunger for God. Every other sensory movement that we can be obsessed around is a reflection, a superficial sign that that hunger exists. Every human being can become obsessed about the wrong things, and it is a constant reminder that we must become possessed by the right person. We hunger for relationship with a higher power, for the God who we can talk to, who can feed us, who is like a living stream, refreshing water that is in our presence all the time and we can turn and drink of God's presence anytime we want.

And that's the true nature of God in Jesus Christ. He is always here. He is always running. He is always refreshing. He is always accessible. And we can let go of our other obsessions and develop a passion for the living God. And so the gospel calls us to worship God in spirit and in truth. Not be preoccupied with the building or the mountain or the pattern of worship. Worship God in spirit and truth, and Jesus said wherever two or three gather together, there I am in their midst. You can worship God wherever people gather in the name of Jesus Christ. Only the water that Jesus gives is the water that satisfies deeply. When we develop a passion and a zeal for Jesus, and we see Jesus as the one who is the living water that gives us God in person, then our obsessions, our addiction, our oppressions, our harassments, our abusive patterns take a second place, and we are able to put everything in perspective.

The apostle Paul understood this when he was Saul and he persecuted the church. He was obsessed with the church and its offensive presence to the living God, and so he would go about every way he knew possible to imprison, to beat, and to kill people who were hurting God. He was obsessed with getting rid of the church. And the only way out of his obsession was to meet Jesus on the road to Damascus and become preoccupied with the greatest presence in the universe -- the resurrected Jesus. Jesus asked him on the road: "Paul, Saul, why do you kick against all the confinements? Why are you fighting so hard with your obsessive behavior? I'm here, talk to me." And that's at the core of every one of our hungers. Why are we so obsessed with so much stuff? God is here. Talk to God. Jesus is wanting to be followed. Follow Jesus. And get into the stream of health.

I was talking with a young woman recently who had faced a young death of cancer. Ambitious, successful, knew multiple languages -- destined for greatness in terms of everyday human life. God stopped her in her tracks. She had to admit that her obsessions with life and success and income and power were nothing when she looked death in the face. There was only one place where she could get what she needed, and that was God's loving presence in Jesus Christ. And that is why we're here today. To relieve us of our obsessions and become possessed by the living God. It is the way we will be in touch with the living water, when we drink deeply of the presence of the one who loves us and releases us from all other controls and addictions and compulsions. There is no other, more powerful presence than Jesus the Christ. Amen.

*Let us pray:* Lord Jesus Christ, now flow to us and into us and through us and bubble up from us the power of your spirit, which is full of grace and love. You might relieve us from the things that control us, and help us to live freely and abundantly in your presence. May your spirit help that to happen in each one of us. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.