

John Chapters 4-5: Christ Prepares Our Work

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on John

Many Christians are familiar with the story of the woman at the well: her inability to move from the everyday work of drawing water to Jesus' pronouncements on the life-giving power of his word. This motif permeates the Gospel: the crowds repeatedly show an inability to transcend everyday concerns and address the spiritual aspects of life. They do not see how Jesus can offer them his body as bread. They think they know where he is from, but they fail to see where he is really from, and they are equally ignorant as to where he is going.

In the case of the woman at the well, it is easy for modern Westerners to miss the drudgery of the woman's daily chores, and to jump too quickly to the conclusion that Jesus frees us from work in the grimy material world so that we can bathe in the sublime waters of spiritual serenity. Instead we must remember the comprehensive nature of Christ's work. The Messiah made the water in the well, and he made it good. If he then uses that water to illustrate the dynamics of the Spirit's work in the hearts of would-be worshippers, that could be seen as an ennoblement of the water rather than a downgrading of it.

In John 4:38, Jesus makes the somewhat cryptic statement, "I sent you to reap for that which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." He is referring to the fact that the disciples have a field of Samaritans ripe for the kingdom, if they will only open their eyes to the opportunity. But who are the "others" who have done the "labor"? Part of the answer seems to be, surprisingly, the woman at the well, who is remembered more for her spiritual slowness than for her subsequent effective testimony for Jesus. "Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I ever did'" (John 4:39). The disciples will simply be reaping where the woman has sown. Yet there is still another worker here: Christ himself. Back at the beginning of the story, we read that Jesus was "tired" from his

journey. A more literal translation would be that Jesus was “labored” from his journey. In truth, Jesus was labored from his journey in Samaria. The field of Samaria is ripe for harvest in part because Christ has labored there. Whatever work we do as Christ’s followers is filled with the glory of God, because Christ has already worked the same fields to prepare them for us.