



## **Series 1: Jesus, disability and discrimination**

### **5 The Second Impression: Full of Grace and Truth**

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So Jesus does and says things that seem strange to us because he is not distracted by the first impression that has more to do with me than the person in front of me, and he takes time to see things as they really are.

I think this is what John means when he describes Jesus as ‘full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14). A little later in his Gospel he describes an encounter with a woman from Samaria, which I think illustrates the phrase perfectly.

It is the middle of the day and Jesus and his disciples are hot and hungry so the Disciples go off to buy some food. Jesus sits down to rest next to a well which we later learn had been built by Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. As Jesus was sitting, resting, a woman approaches.

Most women in Jesus’ day would have drawn water early in the morning and again in the evening because these were the coolest parts of the day. It would therefore have been unusual for a woman to visit the well alone at midday and this was a clear sign that she was considered something of a social outcast by the villagers. We later learn that the woman was living a promiscuous lifestyle which suggests she may have been a prostitute. The Mishnah suggests that Jesus should have withdrawn at least 20 feet and avoided making eye contact but he remains seated. Jesus then does something very surprising given the social customs and the power of taboo in this society - he engages the woman in conversation. Ancient accounts show that even asking for water from a woman could be interpreted as flirting with her, especially if she had come without a chaperone.

Samaritans were sworn enemies, a fact that features heavily in the story Jesus told that we now call the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable actually makes little sense until we appreciate the fact that, to a Jew, there could be no such thing as a ‘good’ Samaritan. What is more, it is Jesus who asks the woman for a drink. This request throws the woman completely because she knew that Jews thought Samaritans were unclean and her water jar would also have been contaminated.

What makes a Rabbi, already heavily criticised for not being ‘religious’ enough, put himself into such a compromising position with the wrong person in the wrong place?

This woman had been hiding from polite society simply because the truth about herself had been too much for her to bear. When her truth was viewed with eyes tinted by grace and applied by the Son of God, the woman was released from her prison. At this point I found myself asking questions of Jesus and, as I began exploring this encounter even more deeply, the thing that struck me most forcibly was the fact that Jesus refused to stand in judgement and seems not to have been at all concerned about how this made him look to others.

There must have been villagers observing them: “why is that man talking to ‘that’ woman?” And the disciples: “what is our rabbi doing now?!” Yet Jesus wasn’t prepared to let fears about his own reputation stop him from affirming and restoring the dignity of a woman who had been destroyed by the bad reputation she had earned herself. Jesus, the prophet, knew the truth and yet her experience of being fully known was one of knowing herself completely loved. He knew the full truth and yet grace caused him to offer her what she needed.

## Discussion Questions

- Would you want your friends to see you engaging with a known prostitute in a public place?
- What did Jesus see that others didn’t?
- How do you understand ‘grace’? In what ways does your understanding cause you to react and respond to others differently?