Irresistible Evangelism: The Wedge
By Jason Huff
Proverbs 20:5, Acts 17:16-23, 32-34a, John 4:5-30, 39-42

Today's final Scripture reading comes from John 4:5-30, 39-42. Listen now to God's Word. "So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?" Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true." "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he." Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?" Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" They came out of the town and made their way toward him…many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." When the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."'"

Can you remember the last time you had a sense of wonder? Maybe it was when you visited a new place. Perhaps you remember falling in love and wanting to discover everything about your sweetheart. It might have been time in prayer or worship experiencing the presence of God. When we describe something that's awesome or spectacular, we say that it's *wonder-ful*. When we experience true wonder, we feel we've truly reached beyond ourselves and experienced something brand-new.

We've been exploring the world of irresistible evangelism and the game of golf the past few weeks. The first week, we talked about the driver of active kindness – showing people who are far away from God His love through simple, personal touches that meet a physical need. Last week, we discussed the irons – developing friendships through active listening that meet a relational need. We don't compromise our Christian integrity, but we actively set ourselves aside to listen to the other person and learn to care for them as Christ does.

Today, we're turning to the third tool in our golf bag – the wedge. You use the wedge when you're close to the green but still need to cover some distance. Hit the ball too hard and you'll pass the green entirely; hit it too soft and you still won't be ready to make a putt. A wedge hit properly sends the ball high up into the air to land right near the hole. The right wedge can even get you out of a sand trap if you hit it right.

The wedge corresponds to a step in Christian friendship – active wondering. We're looking to fill directional needs by asking questions. People at this stage are beginning to think about the direction of their lives. Think of it this way – just as the wedge lofts the ball up into the air nice and easy to set it down on the green, in active wondering, we loft up questions whose answers direct a person closer to God. In our gardening analogy, this step is tending..feeding the garden, mulching it, pulling weeds, giving it every opportunity to grow.

Jesus constantly had people wondering about things…they wondered if He was the Christ, what it meant if He was, if they should follow Him. But He had them wondering about more than that. He'd tell stories and ask questions about them. When He told the story about the Good Samaritan to a Pharisee, He asked the Pharisee questions to see how it might affect his life. Jesus told clever parables to help people develop their relationship with God. Jesus got people thinking. The Scriptures tell us over and over that the people were in awe of Him – Mark 9 says that they were "overwhelmed with wonder." In the same way, in today's passage from Acts, Paul engages in conversation with the famous philosophers in Athens to show the truth of God.

In today's main passage, we see one of the longest recorded bantering sessions Jesus had with anyone. He reaches a Samaritan town a little before noon, and a woman comes out to get water. This is our first sign of something unusual. In that era, you got your water in the early morning, not in the heart of the day. She's by herself, a sign of estrangement because the town well was a place women gathered and talked and shared the news. Jesus asks her for a drink. It doesn't make sense to her because, as a Jew, he should have seen her as an unclean person due to her Samaritan heritage. Jesus' strange request sets Him apart as someone unique.

Jesus brings up the concept of living water. She misunderstands Him and questions Him about how He could possibly have water – after all, didn't He just ask her for a drink? But the situation becomes more clear. Jesus offers her Himself, the living water that will satisfy her soul for eternity. But she is stuck in her own way of seeing…she doesn't want to have to come out to the well embarrassed every day, the shame of the town. So Jesus moves the conversation right where she lives. He asks her to bring her husband out, and it becomes clear that Jesus knows her situation; she's been married five times and is now living with somebody else entirely. She is in desperate need of direction; she has gone from husband to husband in her quest for the one thing that she doesn't even know she needs – a relationship with the living God.

At first, she's reluctant to talk about it. She changes the subject! She starts talking about the differences between Jewish and Samaritan religion. Interestingly enough, Jesus doesn't call her on the carpet over her sins. She's already ostracized her from the village where she lives; she knows her problem. He lets her change the subject because she's headed down the right path – there is a spiritual truth she needs to discern, even though she doesn't know what it is. Jesus points out that the real worship of God isn't about where you worship – it's that you worship the true God with your whole self. Jesus knows this because He is the promised messiah who brings salvation to those throughout the whole world who will believe.

When the woman finds out who Jesus is and understands how the pieces fit together, she goes and tells the whole community. They meet Jesus and believe based on her testimony and the conversations Jesus has with them. Asking questions, having a meaningful discussion full of truth but without condemnation, building a state of wonder – by doing these things in even one conversation, Jesus brings nearly a whole town to salvation.

I want to suggest three ways to practice active wondering with the Holy Spirit's leading to bring people closer to God. Here's the first: *ask your friends questions that get to their deepest interests and needs and show your deep interest in them*. Who is this person sitting across from me? How do we find out? The best way is to dig…not in a prying sense but showing real care. Many of our conversations with friends are merely exchanges of information – "I watched this TV show; I read this book." Sometimes opinion gets mixed in – "I loved this movie; I hated that song." But in active wondering, we're inviting the other person to share their very being with us. If we are made up of more than the media we consume, we need to learn about one another's hopes, dreams, fears, plans, directions, backgrounds, philosophies on life. When we delve into those things, at our best, we will experience wonder because we will see that God has created each one of us specially and uniquely and is drawing each of us to Himself.

In our passage, Jesus answers more questions than He asks. But Jesus directs the conversation right into the deepest areas of the woman's need while showing God's love for her. She comes to the well at noon to escape the taunts and stares of those who condemn her; what's more, she desperately wants acceptance and love. Jesus knows her history – He knows things we'd have to ask some questions to find out. Yet even Jesus' revelation of the woman's past reveals something about God. God knows this woman, a Samaritan who believes she is outside the plan of God because of her ethnicity and her scandalous past. Not only does God know her, but He extends the promise of living water to her – a spring that will never run dry, a love that will not fail when the next man leaves town in the dead of night. She matters to God.

For us to get to the deep issues, we need to ask meaningful and open-ended questions – the pop-up shot we talked about earlier. For example, you might ask questions like these… "How do you teach your children right from wrong?" "What does your work say about who you are?" "What does it mean to you to be a Christian, and who has shown you that in your life?" These kinds of questions give the person a chance to respond thoughtfully.

What we have to avoid are leading questions. We've all heard a new car sales pitch – "Isn't the safety of your family the most important thing? Isn't it worth the money to guarantee their protection?" We're being led to a predetermined answer. Sometimes Christians do the same thing, asking questions like, "Don't you want to avoid hell?" or, "Don't you need forgiveness in your life?" That's not what we're doing. We're trying to truly relate to the other person and reach out to them, and that means leaving the door open. In some ways, the "wondering" stage is a "wandering" stage…we aren't sure exactly where the answers will take us. But as Christians, we know that God is leading us in His direction; we do not have to take the conversation in that direction by force, but by the avenues God opens up in our discussions.

Here's the second way to making active wondering a reality: *don't get distracted by sidesteps or personal opinions that don't fit your worldview, but be sensitive to the other person's reactions*. When the woman at the well was confronted with her own history, she didn't just change the subject. She turned the conversation to a theological logjam between Jews and Samaritans. She attempted to move on to something else. Jesus answers her by steering her away from religious arguments and towards a relationship with God. That's when Jesus shares the news that He is the Messiah that both Jews and Samaritans are waiting for.

When a conversation turns uncomfortably personal, we deflect. It can be gut-wrenching to examine ourselves honestly. To avoid it, we bring up *anything* that will take us from under the microscope. We may try to throw the other person in the conversation under the bus to escape. That's what the woman at the well attempted. When we actively wonder with someone else, it will happen sometimes. That's OK. We need to be aware we've hit a sore spot, an issue that needs to be dealt with gently, perhaps from a different angle.

When somebody sidesteps, we have to realize the sidestep is not about us. I've told the story before about a pastor who was standing in a greeting line following the service. One older parishioner came up to the minster and in an angry voice said, "That was the worst sermon I've ever heard. How did you get to be a reverend, anyway?" At first, the preacher was stunned, but he knew his sermon wasn't offensive or dull. He told her he'd be happy to talk about it later. When that conversation came, he found out that her anger had nothing to do with him or the sermon but the fact that it was the anniversary of her son's death. She was sidestepping her grief by taking it out on the one person who would listen to her.

We may be surprised how personal and confessional a conversation may become. Someone may admit things they do that don't line up with biblical standards or opinions they have that don't reflect godly thinking. That shouldn't surprise us. Sometimes those things are thrown at us intentionally to see how we react. The average unbeliever expects a Christian to immediately judge their sinful choices. When we don't allow ourselves to get distracted by these things but focus on the heart of the person to whom we are listening and ministering, we will see beyond the sins and opinions to the person that God loves…the person that Jesus died to save. Remember that when you ask a question, you want a truthful answer, not a "safe" answer. "Safe" answers don't get us closer to real relationship with God. But when we are truthful with one another, even when we are off course from God, even if we're sitting in the sand trap, we can begin to head in the right direction.

Here's the final step to active wondering: *keep the conversation going*. We aren't used to having meaningful conversations in our lives. We consider marriage to be the closest bond a man and a woman can have, and yet many break up because we stop communicating. We rarely are willing to get this deep with one another; it's too hard, too potentially painful. If it's true of our closest relationships, it's true with our casual friendships as well. We have to be prepared to keep the conversation going over time because, typically, it's not going to happen overnight.

Jesus bantered with the woman at the well for a long while. It was a one-time thing. But throughout their discussion, Jesus kept things moving. He was not content to let the opportunity slip away. But she's not the only one with whom Jesus had an ongoing dialogue. Despite his frustration with their self-righteousness, Jesus challenged the Pharisees over and over again to rethink their positions. They attacked Him, they misrepresented His words, and they worked to have Him killed. But through all of that, Jesus never stopped talking to them. He never gave up on them. He knew that through all the arguments, some would finally understand and trust in Him rather than trust in the law they followed.

When you commit to actively wondering with someone else, you're committing to follow through. When I use a wedge, if I don't take a full swing and don't follow through, the ball doesn't pop up…it goes in a straight line and I'm in even worse shape than when I started. The same is true if you aren't willing to really be a friend to someone and engage them in regular conversation about important spiritual matters. Don't start down this path if you aren't committed to sticking with it. It will require work and sacrifice and may involve pain on your part. But be willing to keep the conversation going no matter what. Jesus was a real friend to Peter – Jesus stuck by him even after Peter had denied Him three times. Jesus forgave and restored Peter. And Jesus is calling us to get into real relationships, to spread His name through them, and to keep the conversation going.

As Proverbs 20:5 taught us today, "The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out." By asking wondering questions, we can draw out those deep waters. We're getting closer to the green each week…helping people get closer and closer to God by each tool He has given us we are willing to use. Who are you willing to wonder with this week?