

“Ifs, Ands, and Buts”

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March 12, 2023

⁵So [Jesus] came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

¹¹The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?”

¹³Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

¹⁵The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.”

¹⁷The woman answered him, “I have no husband.”

Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”

¹⁹The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”

²¹Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

²⁵The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

²⁷Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?”

²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him...

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”
(John 4:5-30, 39-42)

One of the things we learn quickly when entering into the adult world is that we should always read the fine print. It seems like a great end of year sale, “everything must



go,” until you realize the brand you really want is excluded. Or just ask teenager Matt Corby, who went to Subway to get one of the “5 Dollar Footlong” subs he had seen advertised on TV. But when he unwrapped his lunch it didn’t look like he had gotten what he paid for. Sure enough, a ruler proved his instinct right: his “footlong” sub was only eleven inches long. When he followed up with Subway to complain, they responded by invoking some fine print in their advertising: *“With regards to the size of the bread and calling it a footlong, ‘SUBWAY FOOTLONG’ is a registered trademark as a descriptive name for the sub sold in Subway® Restaurants and not intended to be a measurement of length.”*¹ One of the realities of adulthood is that we quickly become a little careful when it comes to promises that sound too good to be true, because of all the “ifs, ands, and buts” that come after the promises. As they say, “What the big print giveth, the small print taketh away.”

This Samaritan woman at the well strikes me as someone who has gotten burned by the fine print in the past. She has been taken in by the promises one too many times, and she is not about to get fooled again. If something seems too good to be true, she figures it probably is, so she is no longer afraid to ask some direct questions.

And yet, there is also something refreshingly honest about her, isn’t there? She has questions, but she doesn’t come across as bitter. We do not get the feeling that she has lost all hope. She is still on the lookout for good, and she is still seeking the light -- she is just going to do some due diligence before she leaps again.

And right off the bat, as soon as she meets this stranger at the well, her fine print radar kicks in. First of all, what is this man doing at the well? Men didn’t usually fetch water. And he looked foreign to her too, like he wasn’t from around these parts. By the look of him, she was pretty sure he was a Jewish man, so what was he even doing in this Samaritan city? Doesn’t he know that Jews and Samaritans never shared anything, that they mistrusted each other, resented each other, even hated each other? Why was he even looking at her, let alone talking to her?

In short, she had a lot of questions. And she picked a particularly bold one to start: *“How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”* It was clear this woman wasn’t going to shy away from religion, politics, or awkwardness of any kind. She was going to get right down into the fine print from the very start.

Jesus is not thrown at all. In fact, Jesus seems impressed, like he finally has a conversation partner who is really worthy of his time. So, he skips right over a potentially nasty religious, nationalistic street argument and goes high with a nuanced religious metaphor. *“If you knew the gift of God, and who I really am, you would have asked me for living water, and I would have given it to you.”*

So many more questions now. What are you talking about, getting me water? You don’t even have a bucket. And what do you mean by “living water”? Who do you think you are? That’s basically what she meant when she asked, *“Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well?”* Who do you think you are?

And I don’t need to reframe the rest of the story, because you just heard it. Jesus explains that the gift he has to offer is refreshment, restoration, the essence of not just life, but *eternal* life. Despite her skepticism, the woman is intrigued. In the dry desert of the life she had known, how could she not want that? *“Sir,”* she says respectfully, *“please give me this kind of water.”* Please give me that kind of life.

¹ <https://abovethelaw.com/2013/10/fun-with-fine-print-fast-food-fun/>

And now it's Jesus' turn to get right to the heart of the matter. Because, right as they arrive at a religious epiphany, He brings up her husband. Or should we say husbands. Five of them. And none of them around anymore. We can only imagine the pain of that backstory. Maybe all five husbands died. Maybe there were some divorces or abandonments in there. Any way you slice it, we can now say with assurance that this woman was a complete outcast in her community. There was no one to claim her, no one to fetch water with her, no one to love her or care for her. She had been burned again and again, disappointed by life again and again.

And here was this Jewish man -- a national enemy... a religious enemy... and someone who seems to know her darkest, saddest shames and secrets -- offering her grace -- a spring of living water that will never fail, that gushes forth unending chances for new life, new love, new purpose and possibility.

All of this, it seemed, was being offered without any caveat or condition. It sounded so good, so wonderful, that there had to be a catch. But Jesus never said, "I would offer this to you, **BUT** you are just a woman." Jesus never said to her, "This Living Water is amazing, **BUT** you can only have it **IF** you are Jewish, or **IF** you are married, or **IF** you have lived a sinless life free of all the mistakes and the shame and all the other things that have made you an outcast in your own town." Try as she might, she couldn't uncover any conditions, and all her questions started boiling down into one: "*He cannot be the Messiah, can he?*" It suddenly seemed possible that Jesus really was legit, that his offer of amazing grace could be real, because as hard as she had been listening out for them, she never heard any ifs, ands, or buts from Jesus.

It's impossible to be sure, but many believe that the first known usage of the idiom "ifs, ands, or buts" was in a sermon given by the Puritan preacher and theologian Thomas Goodwin around 1680. The sermon was about the seemingly boundless grace of God. In it, Goodwin began with a legal concept, *favores ampliandi sunt*, which roughly translates into the judicial idea that, when making judgments, favorable statements should be generously interpreted, while negative or hateful ones should be restrictively considered. Goodwin asserts that God grants grace in this way. "*All grants of favour,*" he preached, "*are to be the most candidly, largely, and favourably interpreted that may be... This, above all, holds in the law of grace, wherein privileges are extended to the utmost.*" In other words, if God can find any way to give us grace, God will always do it.

Goodwin then uses a metaphor to help us understand the concept. He compares the way God searches our hearts to the way fans of a great author might, after that author dies, go through every box, every drawer, in that author's home to find any letter, note, or scrap that the author ever wrote to mine every little nugget of literary gold, so that no good thing might be missed. "*As we search for every line of a dead author of worth among scribblings, that nothing of his might perish,*" Goodwin preached, "*Yea, [even] further, God will take a desire or thought of ours, and amidst the great heap of evil [that may be inside us], he will search out the least scrap of good... [For when] God, out of grace, hath begun to shew favour to a [person], and to accept [that person], [God] is drawn on by grace to pardon thus far, and then further, and in the end so far that it is to wonderment. No [one] can say where [God's] grace will end... The grants of grace run without ifs, and ands, and buts; there are no*

exceptions in them."²

That is the "living water" of grace. That is the extent to which God will go to give us comfort, to offer us peace, and to welcome us safely into the eternal embrace of God's favor. This unconditional generosity is what this woman at the well struggled to understand. She thought there had to be a catch. But there weren't any catches.

Samaritan? Didn't matter.

Religious disputes about which mountain was holier? Didn't matter.

The shame of five lost husbands? Didn't matter.

This unnamed woman was so aware of all the deficiencies in her life, the failures in her life, all the broken, bad things in her life, but Jesus saw the good. He immediately sifted through all the irrelevant dross to find the buried treasures of her spirit. And that's all he held onto – that is all he cared about.

What Goodman preached in London almost 450 years ago is no less true today than it was then. We still do not know the limits of God's grace. Just when we think we have hit that limit, just when we worry that we might have stepped a little too far away, God loves a little more, and then a little more, to the point that, in the end, we can only stand in awe and wonder of the vast ocean of grace that God is ready to extend to us.

So, believe the good news, and be at peace. God loves you ... no ifs, ands, or buts about it. ***Amen.***

²<http://www.digitalpuritan.net/Digital%20Puritan%20Resources/Goodwin%2C%20Thomas/The%20Works%20of%20Thomas%20Goodwin%20%28vol.9%29.pdf>