

“Those Who Hear Will Live”

The Seventeenth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 5:19-29; Ezekiel 37:1-14

You knew it was bound to happen—sooner or later in our series on the Gospel of John we would come to eschatology. As we will see in our text (John 5:19-29), eschatology is a very important theme in John’s Gospel. Through his signs and wonders, Jesus has identified and proven himself to be the redeemer promised throughout the Old Testament. The redemption to be brought about by our Lord extends beyond the salvation of our souls to include the redemption of our bodies. Jesus has clearly identified himself as Israel’s Messiah who has come to do the will of his Father so as to fulfill all righteousness. This is why Jesus works on the Sabbath, because his Father works on the Sabbath. And what the Father does, Jesus does. Now we learn that the Father has given Jesus the power to give new life and raise the dead. And the resurrection of the dead, of course, is at the very heart of Christian eschatology.

As we saw in the first 18 verses of John 5 (our text last time), at some point Jesus left the Galilee region and returned to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. While in Jerusalem and passing by the pools of Bethesda, Jesus instantaneously and miraculously healed a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. Sadly, the former invalid showed no gratitude whatsoever at what Jesus had done for him. When the man stood up and carried his bedroll as Jesus commanded him to do, the man was accused of being a law-breaker by the Jewish authorities because he dared to carry his bedroll on the Sabbath. While such an act was not a violation of the biblical commandment to keep the Sabbath as a day of rest unto the Lord, it was a violation of Jewish tradition which identified thirty-nine specific types of work which were supposedly a violation of the Sabbath commandment. Apparently, moving a bedroll on the Sabbath was one of them.

When confronted about his supposed violation of the Sabbath commandment, the former invalid, in turn, directed the Jewish leaders to Jesus. According to John 5:15 and following, *“the man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath.”* John does not give us any specifics, but based upon the fact that the Jews, apparently, had been persecuting Jesus for some time because he “worked” on the Sabbath, at the very least this implies that the incident reported in the first 18 verses of John 5 was only the latest in a string of heated encounters between Jesus and the Jews over proper Sabbath observance.

We don’t know what the Jews said to Jesus, only what Jesus said to them. We read in verse 17, *“but Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is working until now, and I am working.’”* According to the creation account God created for six days and rested on the seventh. The Jews of Jesus’ day understood full well that God worked on the Sabbath because as creator of all things, God also sustained all things. God did not take Saturday off. The work of providence continues 24/7. The Jews understood this point, and this was not even an issue. But in the minds of the Jewish leaders, Jesus was a Sabbath-breaker because he “worked” on the Sabbath in a way which was forbidden according to their tradition. Despite the fact that a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years was healed and his life restored to him, the Jews angrily declared of this healing, “it is not lawful.” We read not of a word of praise unto the Lord.

No doubt, this is why Jesus says to them *“my Father is working and I am working.”* The Father works on the Sabbath because he is Lord over all things, and he continuously upholds the universe by his power.

Jesus too works, because he is God in human flesh, and the second person of the Trinity. Jesus heals on the Sabbath because God works on the Sabbath. That the Jews understood what Jesus meant by his response is clear from verse 18. “*This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*” Not only does Jesus dare to speak of YHWH as “my Father,” but the Jews believed that Jesus justified his own Sabbath-breaking by claiming to be equal with God. The Jews were furious with Jesus’ answer and as John tells us, it was because of Jesus’ dismissal of Jewish tradition regarding the Sabbath commandment that they sought to kill Jesus. In this summary comment from John, we see just how far Israel has fallen into unbelief, as well as why the nation was about to come under God’s covenant curses. The Messiah has come to save Israel from their sins, but all they seem to care about is that Jesus is not playing by their rules.

Throughout the rest of chapter 5 (vv. 19-47), Jesus responds to this unbelief on the part of the Jewish religious leaders by speaking directly to the nature of his authority and messianic mission. As Jesus reveals who he is, the escalation of this tension between Jesus and the Jewish leaders will only increase in the next few chapters, especially 7-9. We continue to look at Jesus’ response to the Jews who questioned him about the Sabbath, and who were accusing him of blasphemy. While verses 16-47 are one continuous response given by Jesus to these Jewish leaders, we will look at this chapter in 3 parts. Last time, we covered the occasion for Jesus’ discourse (when he healed the man at the pools of Bethesda—his fourth miraculous sign). We will deal with verses 19-29 when Jesus speaks about his power to raise the dead (eschatology). Next time (Lord willing), we will take up Jesus’ relationship to the Father and how Moses foretold of Jesus and his messianic mission.

Before we turn to our text, a brief word is necessary about the eschatology we have seen in John so far. Even in the early chapters of John’s Gospel Jesus has been speaking of an hour which is yet to come, but which in some sense has already arrived because he has already commenced his messianic mission. This language reflects the “this age/age to come” distinction found throughout the New Testament, especially in connection to the end-times. When Jesus says that “the hour has come, but is still to come” this functions very much like Paul’s distinction between “the already” and “not yet.”

Because Jesus will fulfill the prophetic expectations of the Old Testament, we *already* possess all those blessings which he has secured for us through his death and resurrection. But his coming, in turn, becomes the basis for a whole new series of promises of which we have barely been given a foretaste. In other words, the blessings we already possess in the present are the guarantee of our complete and future inheritance in Christ—including the resurrection of our bodies and dwelling for all eternity in the presence of God in a new heaven and earth. How we understand this already/not yet aspect of the New Testament’s teaching determines in what camp we land when it comes to those eschatological positions which divide much of American Christianity; dispensational premillennialism, historic premillennialism, or amillennialism.

Take, for example, one important declaration from Jesus which we find in our text. When Jesus tells the Jews that the dead have already passed from death to life because they have heard the word of God—meaning that some sort of “resurrection” takes place in this life *before* we die—Jesus knocks the theological legs out from under those Christians who are premillennial. Premillennial Christians believe that after Jesus returns (his second advent), he establishes a physical kingdom on the earth and then personally rules the over nations from Jerusalem. Premillennarians believe that the “first resurrection” (the resurrection of the dead) does not occur until Jesus returns at the time of the end. The dead don’t come to life and rule with Jesus until that time (the thousand years—the millennium) when lions lie down

with lambs, and while the earth is re-populated by people in natural bodies who will live side by side with those who were raised from the dead when Jesus returns.

Not only is this huge a problem in its own right (resurrected and unresurrected people living together on earth after Jesus returns), but in John 5, Jesus tells us that the first resurrection occurs when God grants us new life—in this age, *before* Jesus returns a second time at the end of the age. If this is the case, then premillennialism is no longer a viable biblical option, because the first resurrection is a reference to regeneration, which occurs in the present, not at time of the end. So, this is one of those critical biblical passages which forces us to make a choice from among contemporary end-times opinions held by Christians who do not agree about these things and which divide the church. As Yogi Berra once said, when you come to a fork in the road, take it. Well, Jesus tells us that in one sense, the resurrection has already occurred when God gave us new life in Christ—no small point when making a choice about which of the end-times views we will embrace.

So, with this in mind, we pick up where we left off last time, with verse 19 of John 5. The context for what follows is that Jesus is continuing his response to those Jews who have accused him of breaking the Sabbath commandment and speaking blasphemies. In this section of John 5, Jesus gives the Jews four statements of explanation about his person and messianic mission in verses 19-23.¹ The first statement is found in verse 19. “*So Jesus said to [the Jews], ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.’*” As Jesus works on the Sabbath because the Father does, so now Jesus responds to the charge that he has made himself equal to the Father by reaffirming that he is equal to God! In other words, the Jews have indeed understood him correctly.

Jesus does not work on his own apart from the Father, in some independent sense. There are not two Gods with two different wills and purposes. Jesus can do nothing on his own, for everything that he does is in obedience to the will of God, his Father. Jesus can only do what he sees the Father doing. This is why Christians affirm that Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation of God. God is spirit (immaterial), transcendent (other than) and qualitatively different from us. But Jesus Christ is the second person of the blessed Trinity who took to himself a true human nature. If we wish to know about God, we must look to Jesus Christ, who does the Father’s will, who speaks the Father’s word, and who can do nothing on his own. Jesus only does what the Father does. In this, Jesus reveals the Father to us.

The next line of explanation comes in verse 20. Here, Jesus speaks of possessing a unique relationship to the Father. He says “*for the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel.*” This is a remarkable claim in many ways. First, it completely refutes the ancient heresy of modalism now held by “oneness Pentecostals” that God is not Triune, but one person who is called the Father in the Old Testament, the Son in the New, and the Spirit in the present. Second, Jesus’ statement presupposes a filial and loving relationship between Jesus and the Father which extends back before the incarnation—the Father loves Jesus eternally.

Furthermore, if the Father demonstrates his love toward the Son, then it is in the person and work of Jesus that we see the love of God manifest toward us. To discover the love of God, we look to the Son—specifically to the chief sign of God’s love for sinners, the cross of Christ where we find a bloodied savior dying and bearing in his own flesh the wrath of God, turning that wrath aside from us, securing for

¹ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 251.

us all the benefits which we sinners could never earn, nor find on our own. This is the chief place where we find God's love—not the only place, but the chief place. For God so loved the world . . .

When Jesus speaks of greater works that the Father will show them—to further confirm his identity as Israel's Messiah and the Son of God—Jesus is telling the Jews that they will continue to marvel at what he will do. His messianic mission is not yet complete. And despite the signs and wonders to come, the Jews still will not believe. Ironically, they will put Jesus to death and in doing so bring about the greatest wonder of them all—our Lord's resurrection from the dead. The great paradox here is that those who hate Jesus the most and who seek to stop his messianic mission, actually bring about the greatest display of God's love (the cross) and they create the circumstances under which God conquers death and the grave when the crucified one rises again from the dead (the resurrection). Marvel indeed. Believe in Jesus as Savior? Not unless it is granted to them (or to us) by that one who has the power of life.

In verse 21, Jesus makes this very point—the third of his points of response. *“For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.”* Every Jew believed that YHWH was the creator and sustainer of all things. YHWH is the author and source of all life. Most Jews (i.e., the Pharisees, but not the Sadducees) believed that there would be a bodily resurrection at the end of time as foretold by the prophet Daniel (chapter 12), and that the righteous would rise to eternal life, while the unrighteous would rise to eternal punishment. Jesus now affirms that there will indeed be such a resurrection from the dead, and that it is he (Jesus) who will do the raising! Jesus will explain this point in more detail in verses 24-29.

There is important Old Testament background here. In the great messianic prophecy regarding the dead bones coming to life in Ezekiel 37 (which we read as our Old Testament lesson), YHWH is speaking and says in verse 13, *“and you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people.”* Therefore, Jesus is now claiming to be the same Lord who will open the graves of his people and raise the dead. Jesus will do this because the Father has given this task of raising the dead to the Son. Mind you, the one saying this has already performed four miraculous signs (as recorded by John), the last of them being the instantaneous and miraculous healing of a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years, by simply commanding that the man get up and walk, and he did. The one who can heal an invalid, now says he will raise the dead. It is important that we keep in mind the proximity between Jesus' words here, and the healing for which he is accused of breaking the Sabbath. The Jews have just witnessed a powerful indication from Jesus that he can do what he has promised to do. Just as he has healed the invalid, so too he will raise the dead. These are not empty words.

Jesus' fourth and final assertion about his identity comes in verse 22-23. *“The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.”* God is the judge of all the earth—every Jew knew and believed that. In Genesis 18:25, we read the well-known words from Abraham, *“shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”* Of course, he will. And now Jesus says that the judge who will do right has entrusted this judgment to him. The reason why the judge (YHWH) does this is so that all the earth will honor his Son (Jesus) even as they should honor the Father. In fact, whoever does not honor Jesus does not honor the Father who sent him.

Let us be as clear here as we can. We cannot imagine words more inflammatory which could be uttered to a Jew than those just spoken by Jesus. If Jesus is not who he claims, he is a madman and a blasphemer. No question about it. Sane people do not speak like this, unless, of course, they truly are God in human flesh speaking the truth. Because Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the World, and

Israel's Messiah—as proven by his miracles—then he has just spoken words which expose how little interest the Jews truly had in honoring YHWH, and how indifferent they were in doing his will as revealed in his word (the Old Testament). But let someone dare challenge their traditions.

All four assertions made by Jesus are direct claims to deity and collectively amount to a theological explanation and biblical foundation for all the things that Jesus has said and done up to this point. Jesus' words also point to the things he will yet do in the future, because these things have been given to him by YHWH to accomplish. Jesus will grant eternal life and raise the dead. There is a resurrection of the body and a final judgment, and Jesus will preside over both. But there is also a resurrection which takes place before the resurrection of the body when Jesus returns a second time—something inconceivable to his current audience before his death, resurrection, and ascension take place. It is to that matter which Jesus turns in verses 24-29, which amount to an explanation of how he gives eternal life in this present age (regeneration) and how he will judge all people and nations on the final day of human history.

In verse 24, Jesus uses the solemn “truly, truly” formula to introduce his explanation for the power to give life granted unto him by the Father. In verse 21 Jesus said, “*the Son gives life to whom he will,*” and here in verse 24, Jesus explains what this means. “*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.*” It is easy for the English ear to hear this sentence as though it read, “whoever hears my word and believes receives eternal life.” But the sentence doesn't read that way. Rather it reads, “whoever hears Jesus' word and believes *has* [already possesses] eternal life.” The hearing of Jesus' word is directly tied to the possession of eternal life. In fact, it is Jesus' word which gives eternal life and then creates faith.

This is a very important point because so many of our contemporaries contend that when the gospel is preached or shared with someone, it is up to one hearing the gospel to decide whether or not to believe it (implying that the human will is free—in the sense of being untainted by human sin—to decide such things). Rather, as Jesus tells us, it is the preaching of the word which creates faith (i.e., “hearing”) and results in eternal life. In other words, we Calvinists are absolutely correct to argue that regeneration (the new life which Jesus gives) precedes faith. Someone must be made alive (and given eternal life) in order to believe in Jesus. And Jesus ties this to his word as the means through which God now grants life. Therefore, we are right to affirm that it is the preaching of the gospel which creates eternal life and faith in Jesus. This is perfectly consistent with what we heard in the prologue of John (v. 12-13): “*But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*” We have already been raised from the dead, if we trust (believe) in Jesus. And we only believe in Jesus because God has granted us eternal life through the preached word. Jesus could not be any clearer about this.

Jesus also declares of that one who hears his word, has been granted eternal life, and then believes, “*he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.*” Those who have been given life (and are born again or regenerate), will not face an angry God in the judgment, because they have already passed from death to life. All those who have life (in the present) do not come into judgment in the future. This means that a true Christian cannot fall away and be lost. It also means that the first resurrection (when we are given life) has already taken place for those who have been made alive. The granting of life (regeneration) is the first resurrection. The resurrection of the body will not occur until Jesus comes back. This means that the scene depicted in Revelation 20 of a thousand years is a picture of the present age (the time between Christ's first and second advent) and is not a picture of a future millennial age, as premillennarians believe. That Jesus is not a millennarian is clear from this text.

Jesus continues to explain the relationship between the already/this age/this hour and the not yet/age to come/coming hour in verse 25. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.”* Because Jesus has come (the hour is now here *already*), the dead will hear his voice in this age (through God’s word) and will live (come to life—be “born again” or regenerated). In once sense, then, the dead have already been raised. The first resurrection has already taken place for those in Christ. Those who were once dead in sin are given new life by Jesus through his word. They have been “born of God.”

Several things should jump out as us from this remarkable declaration. If only God can raise the dead and give new life, and since Jesus raises the dead and gives new life, then Jesus is God. This is yet another claim to deity by Jesus. Jesus also makes plain the fact that new life cannot come about through an act of the human will—say, by accepting Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior, or walking an aisle and repeating a prayer after the minister. People can only come to faith in Jesus Christ after he has given us life through his word (i.e., the preaching of the Gospel). And the only acceptable response to hearing the gospel is to trust in Jesus (i.e., believe in him, and trust in him to save you from the guilt of your sins).

In verse 26, Jesus explains why he can exercise divine rights and privileges—i.e., giving life and raising the dead. *“For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.”* The human will cannot raise itself from the dead or free itself from the effects of sin and the curse. Only God can do this, and God has entrusted this to Jesus. Jesus is telling those Jews listening to him that he is God in human flesh, because he does the things only God can do. As he goes on to say to them in verse 27, *“and [the Father] has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.”* Jesus’ point is that those Jews who were passing judgment upon him—calling him a Sabbath-breaker and a blasphemer—must carefully consider to whom they are speaking and accusing of blasphemy.

Jesus is the only person present who has the right to judge anyone because this has been given to him by the Father. Jesus even declares himself to be the Son of Man—a reference to Daniel 7:13-14. *“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”* Jesus is that one who dwells in the presence of the Ancient of Days, who possesses an everlasting kingdom. Who are these hard-hearted, unbelieving, tradition-defenders to stand in judgment over him?

In verses 28-29, Jesus makes one more point about the resurrection of the body yet to come. In making this point, Jesus is re-affirming that the Pharisees are right about a future resurrection of the body. But they may be very disappointed in the final outcome of that resurrection. *“Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”* There is indeed a final judgment coming. All those who have ever lived, believer or unbeliever alike, will be bodily raised from the dead and released from their tombs on the last day. Those who have done good will enter God’s eternal blessing. Those who have done evil, will enter into eternal judgment.

Although nothing is said, we are not out of line in thinking the Jews present would be saying to themselves in response to Jesus’ declaration, “whew! I’ve done good and have been zealous to obey the commandments of God. It is the godless Gentiles about whom he must be speaking.” But Jesus’ declaration is not what the self-righteous think it is. The answer to the question of whether or not any human has done good is a resounding “no.” An explanation of this will come later from Jesus in John

6:28-29 when some in the crowd who had been following Jesus asked him, “*What must we do, to be doing the works of God?*” Jesus answered them, *‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’*” The Jews confronting Jesus do not believe. Far from it. They are already plotting his death. God has not yet granted any of them eternal life. They have not done the good works which God requires to gain eternal life.

The great irony we have seen throughout this Gospel appears yet again. Those who think themselves to be righteous, prove themselves to be unrighteous by their very efforts to prove how righteous they are. Yet those who know themselves to be unrighteous and deserving of God’s judgment, and do not appeal to their works, but who nevertheless trust in God’s mercy to save them, will indeed be reckoned as righteous. Those who have been born of God and made alive will trust in God’s mercy. And didn’t Jesus himself just say to the Jews say that those whom he has made alive “*do not come into judgment,*” because “*those who hear, will live.*” But then this is the very thing the Jews confronting Jesus refuse to believe. And sadly, it is why on the day of judgment that they will take their chances that they have done enough good works to gain eternal life, when ironically, the life they seek is only granted by the one they are condemning and seeking to kill.