

“The Scriptures Bear Witness About Me”

The Eighteenth in a series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

John 5:30-47; Deuteronomy 18:15-22

Apparently, the Jews were demanding witnesses to confirm that Jesus is who he claims to be. They have accused Jesus of being a Sabbath-breaker and a blasphemer. The three greatest figures in the Judaism of Jesus’s day were Moses, Abraham, and David. Jacob and Joshua were not far behind in terms of status. If the Jews want witnesses, ironically, Jesus can adduce all five of Israel’s greatest historical figures as witnesses who will testify that Jesus is the coming one and redeemer of Israel. In John 5, Jesus ends a lengthy discourse by telling his accusers that he is that one of whom Moses had been speaking when referring to the great prophet yet to come. Jesus has told the Jews that he cannot break the Sabbath commandment because God works on the Sabbath. He also told them that he cannot blaspheme God because he speaks only the words the Father gives him. Now, at the end of this exchange, says Jesus, it is the testimony of Moses which ultimately condemns those accusing Jesus of all sorts of sins which were in Israel at the time capital crimes. Moses condemns Jesus’ accusers because they do not believe the very Scriptures they cite in response to Jesus’ miracles and teaching. If you want witnesses, well then consider Moses, Abraham, David, Jacob, and Joshua who all testify on Jesus’ behalf. The Jews of Jesus’ day have not learned one of life’s most important lessons: “be careful what you ask for.”

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of John, and we are in the process of working our way through John chapter 5, in which Jesus has returned to Jerusalem from the Galilee region for a feast of the Jews. The chapter recounts the miraculous healing of a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years and the lengthy discourse which follows between Jesus and those Jews who had been accusing him of breaking the Sabbath and claiming to be God. Although, the chapter recounts one event and the dialogue which follows, I have broken the chapter into three sections so as not to hurry through and skip the important details we find in the text. In this chapter, Jesus reveals a great deal about his divine identity, as well as important details about the nature of his messianic mission.

Two Sundays ago, we covered Jesus’ miraculous healing of the invalid at the Pools of Bethesda (vv. 1-18), who without offering so much as a word of gratitude pointed out Jesus to the Jewish leaders who, in turn, promptly accused our Lord of breaking the Sabbath and speaking blasphemies. Last week, we took up the first part of Jesus’ response to the Jews (vv. 19-29), wherein Jesus made four specific declarations about his deity and his divine authority in response to these accusations. In verse 19, Jesus tells his accusers that he does only that which is his Father’s will, and in fact, that he can do nothing apart from his Father’s will—this is a major theme in the latter portion of the dialogue we are covering. Jesus also speaks of how he is the object of the Father’s love—pointing to an intimate and eternal inter-Trinitarian relationship between the Father and the Son. This relationship also implies Jesus’ deity.

Jesus goes on to tell the Jews that even now he raises the dead through his word (regeneration) because the authority to do so has been given him by the Father. There is indeed a bodily resurrection of the dead at the end of the age, and whether or not people rise to eternal blessing or curse depends upon whether or not Jesus gives them life. Declaring himself to be the Son of Man, who, in Daniel 7:13-14, enters into the presence of the Ancient of Days (YHWH), Jesus goes on to tell those questioning him, that all authority to judge all people and nations has been given by the Father to Jesus. It is Jesus who gives life to the dead bones in Ezekiel’s vision, which in the vision is a task YHWH ascribes to himself. It is Jesus

who will raise the dead (both the righteous and the unrighteous) from their graves on the last day.

As we have seen, Jesus' response to the objection about Sabbath breaking is to affirm that since God works on the Sabbath, Jesus works on the Sabbath. This is a claim to deity. Elsewhere Jesus speaks of having come to fulfill the fourth commandment (regarding the Sabbath). He has not come to comply with Jewish tradition—which is nothing more than the rules of men, which cruelly taught that an invalid who moves his bedroll on the Sabbath because miraculously God healed him, was a violation of the law. Instead of praising God, the Jews complain that Jesus is acting unlawfully. And as for the accusation that Jesus is making himself equal to God, his Jewish accusers have indeed correctly understood him when he claims divine attributes unto himself, and speaks of God in such a way that unless he truly is the Son of God, then he is blaspheming and a danger to himself and to others.

We now turn to the third part of Jesus' response (vv. 30-47) when Jesus speaks directly to question of the nature of his authority before he points out to those questioning him that Moses foretold of his coming, and that the experts in Jewish law did not believe nor understand their own Scriptures which speak of Jesus as the promised one. As we turn to verse 30 and look closely at the last part of this compelling dialogue, Jesus continues to respond to those Jews who have accused him of being a Sabbath-breaker and of speaking blasphemies. John has not told us of what the Jews had said, only that they have been persecuting Jesus because they think Jesus to be a Sabbath-breaker.

As we saw last time, Jesus has repeatedly affirmed that he can do nothing by himself, and can only do that which is in compliance with the will of his Father. In verse 30, Jesus reaffirms this very point. "*I can do nothing on my own.*" This declaration extends to that judgment Jesus exercises when contending with the Jews who have placed themselves and their tradition above the authority of Jesus (and even over Moses, as we will see). Reiterating words he has just spoken in verses 19-20, Jesus tells them "*as I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.*" What the Jews have accused Jesus of doing—healing on the Sabbath in violation of their tradition, or speaking of God as his equal—amounts to Jesus doing what the Father sent him to do. Jesus has authority to judge because YHWH gave that authority to him. Jesus is not freelancing or making this stuff up as he goes along! No, he has been sent to do the will of his Father, and that is exactly what he has done. If Jesus is doing God's will, then those opposing him are opposing God and not obeying God's will.

As Jesus tells us in verses 31-32, he not only bears witness about the Father, but the Father bears witness to his Son. "*If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true.*" At first glance, this sounds like Jesus is affirming a legal principle about the requirements for the giving of testimony. Both the Jews and Romans had very sophisticated legal systems for the time. Under Jewish and Roman law, it took the testimony of two or more witnesses to find anyone guilty of a crime.

But Jesus is not speaking strictly in terms of a legal defense. Jesus is making a broader point. Since two witnesses are needed for testimony to be valid, Jesus' testimony by itself is not enough—a point he grants. But the Father's testimony to Jesus messianic mission does provide the necessary second witness. Jesus is saying, in effect, that his own testimony is not enough to "prove" to the Jews that he is who he says he is. But his testimony has been confirmed by his Father who sent him. In fact, his Father testifies about Jesus his Son. In other words, Jesus' messianic mission is valid because the Father, who is greater than all human witnesses, has testified about the truth of Jesus' testimony and mission. You cannot invoke a higher authority than YHWH!

Jesus is not seeking to do his own will, but is seeking to obey his Father's will. The Father is not just a second witness who enables Jesus to meet a precise legal requirement. Rather, Jesus' entire ministry is validated by the fact that the Father bears witness about the Son. In other words, it is the Father who sent Jesus, and the Father who validates Jesus' ministry—the testimony that he bears about me is true.¹ Yes, Jesus has two witnesses as required by the civil law. But far more important for the discussion at hand is the fact that the Father has testified that Jesus is his Son who has come to obey his will. The broader point is that the Father (YHWH) bears witness to Jesus, not just that Jesus bears witness to the Father. The Jews present must have been speechless at hearing these words. No matter how many accusations they bring against Jesus, the Father's testimony to his Son refutes all of them.

But if it is human witnesses the Jews want, Jesus can also point out to them that they have already heard the testimony of another important witness who has been sent by God. Jesus reminds them in verse 33, “*you sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth.*” The Baptist came and testified that he was Elijah, whose task was to announce that the Messiah was at hand. It was John who bore witness to Jesus by preparing the way for Jesus's messianic mission. The purpose for which God sent John was spelled out in the prologue of the Gospel. As we read in John 1:6-8, “*there was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.*”

When the Jews sent a delegation to confront the Baptist while he was still ministering out in the wilderness (as recounted in John 1:19-28), John told them “*I am not the Christ.*” John also said, “*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.*” And then we read in verse 29 that John the Baptist said to the Jews the next day, “*behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” The Jews have heard more than enough legal testimony to “prove” that Jesus is the Messiah. But what truly matters is not human testimony to the truth of Jesus' mission, but the blessing of his mission, and the testimony to its validity by his Father.

This is why Jesus can explain in verse 34, “*not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved.*” In verses 19-29, Jesus has just told the Jews of his eternal relationship with the Father. Jesus does only what he sees the Father doing. In fact, the Father's love is poured out upon the Son from all eternity, and it is Jesus who then displays the Father's love for us in his suffering for us and in our place upon the cross. Jesus has been given the power to raise the dead by the Father (which he does when the dead hear his voice and pass from death to life—regeneration). The Father has been given Jesus the authority to judge all people. Since Jesus alone possesses such a relationship with God (being the eternal word and the second person of the Holy Trinity), it is not human testimony about his authority which matters in this case, but the Father's testimony that Jesus has authority to bear witness about God. Because Jesus has come to do the will of his Father, Jesus says and does these things so that people might believe his testimony, and thereby be saved from God's wrath which is coming upon the whole earth.

As for John the Baptist, Jesus says of him “*he was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.*” John was not the light of the world—Jesus is. But John bore witness to the light (truth) into the world insofar as his ministry was a testimony to the coming messianic mission of

¹ See the discussion of this in: Carson, The Gospel According to John, 259.

Jesus. Here, when speaking of the mission of John, Jesus alludes to Psalm 132:17.² *“I have prepared a lamp for my anointed.”* John brought the light of truth (that judgment was coming) to prepare Israel for the coming of the Messiah. Many Jews followed John, even venturing out into distant wilderness areas to hear John preach and to receive his baptism of repentance. John the Baptist did indeed bring light to the Jews. But from Jesus’ statement here, it is implied that John’s ministry had already come to an end (his arrest and execution by Herod). That light is now extinguished. But the greater light has come.

As important as John’s testimony was, Jesus’ possesses testimony far greater than John’s. As he declares in verse 36, *“but the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me.”* The Father bears witness to Jesus, his eternal Son. Nothing else is needed. God is gracious in sending John to prepare the way, but the Father’s witness is much greater. This witness to the truth of Jesus’ mission is evident in the works which the Father has given Jesus to do, and which is confirmed by those signs and wonders which Jesus has performed in the presence of those accusing him.

Lest, we forget, this discourse is given immediately upon the heels of Jesus’ healing of a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. Anyone watching Jesus and who saw these miracles should have been on their knees praising God and giving thanks for what they have just witnessed. Instead, having seen the signs which Jesus did, the Jews are accusing Jesus of capital crimes and seeking his death. Jesus performed miracles which only God in human flesh could perform. These miracles are the Father’s testimony to the truth of Jesus’ mission. Yet it is because Jesus has done these miracles that the Jews are already seeking to kill him. The Father bears witness to Jesus. But the conduct of the Jews bears witness to the innate sinfulness of every human heart including our own.

Jesus continues to make this point in verses 37-38. *“And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent.”* Here, Jesus may be speaking of his baptism by John as recorded in the synoptic gospels when we read, of example in Matthew 3:16-17. *“And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’”* Jesus may also be speaking of everything he has said and done up to this point in his messianic mission. Jesus may be speaking of both. Either way, the Father has borne sufficient witness for all those accusing Jesus and persecuting him, to accept his witness that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. But, they will not.

Unlike Moses, who heard God’s voice (Exodus 33:11), Jesus’ accusers have never heard God speak audibly. And to be sure the point Jesus is making is not lost to us, consider the irony of the fact that the Son of God (whose eternal glory was veiled with flesh) is the one speaking to them. His voice is God’s voice. Furthermore, the Jews accusing Jesus have never seen God with their own eyes. According to Genesis 32:30-31, Jacob, Israel’s great patriarch, saw God. Again, the irony jumps out at us when we consider that the one standing there, visible to them, is God in human flesh. Then Jesus tells them that God’s word does not abide in them, unlike Old Testament figures such as Joshua (Joshua 1:8-9), or even the Psalmist about both of whom, it is said, God’s word abides in their hearts. Remarkably, it is Jesus, standing before them, speaking to them the word of God. Yet that word does not abide in his audience’s hearts, because they do not believe that he is that one whom God has sent. This is both a tragic and

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 261.

ironic scene. In the person of Jesus, the Jews *have seen* that one whom Moses heard, Jacob saw, and whose word abided in the hearts of Joshua and the Psalmist. But as Jesus now tells them, they do not see, hear, or believe.

Jesus does not give them an inch of room to maneuver. In the next verse he tells them “*you search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me.*” These men knew their Bibles. They studied their Bibles. In an age before the printing press and electricity these men diligently searched the Scriptures—not an easy task as it is for us. Many of them had memorized a great deal of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalter and were well familiar with the contents of Scripture. No doubt, they also knew from memory the oral traditions which sprang up alongside the Scripture and which Jesus steadfastly refuses to obey. Eternal life, Jesus warns them, does not come from knowing the Bible, memorizing it, searching it, reading it through the lens of your oral tradition, or being able to cite its maxims so as to live a happy, successful, or prosperous life.

The Bible, Jesus says, bears witness about him. Six times in John’s Gospel we find it reported by John that the Old Testament speaks of Jesus yet to come.³ This is perhaps the clearest of the six. The Bible is a book about redemptive history. The central figure in the story of our redemption is Jesus Christ—hidden in type and shadow in the Old Testament and fully revealed in the New. This is why we must insist upon a Christ-centered reading, preaching, and teaching of Scripture. Jesus himself tells us that all of the Bible, even the Old Testament, is a revelation of his person and work. If you are looking to the Bible for inspiration, guidance, general knowledge, or religious principles apart from Christ’s person and work, you are misreading it. The divine author himself tells us to look for him throughout Scripture because those Scriptures bear witness about him.

In the context of this dialogue between Jesus and the Jews this point is huge. The Jews demand witnesses. Jesus tells them that the Father bears witness to him through Jesus’ miracles and words. Jesus has also told them that John the Baptist bears witness to him and his ministry. Now he tells the Jews that the entirety of Hebrew Scripture bears witness to him. You want witnesses. Read Moses. Read Joshua. Read the Psalter. Read the prophets. Every key person in the Old Testament can be invoked as a witness to the truth of Jesus’ messianic mission. Again, the irony is almost painful. Those most zealous to defend the Bible (but only as it is read through the lens of their oral tradition) have just had their theological legs completely knocked out from under them. The Father bears witness to Jesus. The Torah bears witness to Jesus. Moses bears witness to Jesus.

Because these men know their Bibles, they are without excuse. Despite everything Jesus has said and done up to this point, they do refuse to believe in him, or accept the testimony from the Father and the Word of God. Jesus tells them “*yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.*” These proud men would rather think themselves to be in the right and then die in their sins, then admit they are wrong, repent of their sins, renounce their own righteousness, and come to the Savior who offers them eternal life. But this is what every sinful human heart does apart from God’s grace. Just as was the case with them, our sinful hearts love darkness and reject light. These men have memorized much of the Old Testament for the sole purpose of defending their tradition. They simply will not read Scripture so as to find in it the mercies of a gracious God who has sent to them a Savior who can and will save them from their sin if only they will. But they won’t. It is all so tragic.

³ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 263.

In verse 41, Jesus speaks about his motive behind his mission. *“I do not receive glory from people.”* He has come to do the Father’s will, not attract followers, or create a political movement, which the Jews may have feared. Besides, why does Jesus need or want human glory when that is something only the Father can truly bestow—glory, which by the way, he has known with the Father throughout all of eternity past. Jesus also speaks to the motives of those accusing him of blasphemy and persecuting him for supposedly breaking the Sabbath when he had done no such thing. *“But I know that you do not have the love of God within you.”* As we will see in later chapters, Jesus will begin to speak more and more candidly about the mind-set and the motives of the Jewish religious leaders.

Despite the overwhelming testimony—from the Father, from the key figures of the Old Testament, from John the Baptist—the Jews still reject him. *“I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him.”* The famed Jewish historian Josephus tells us that messianic pretenders were common in this era, all promising the Jewish people deliverance from Roman occupation of the Jewish homeland. The Jews, apparently, would listen to these men and not accuse them of the things they were accusing Jesus of doing. By listening to these messianic pretenders, the Jews show nothing but contempt for Jesus, and therefore for the Father who sent him, and whose glory and approval they should be seeking, but instead reject.

In verse 44, Jesus asks them a rhetorical question which has already been answered. *“How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?”* The Jews do not seek to honor God. Instead, they seek to demonstrate their piety to each other in open displays of self-righteousness. They have condemned themselves in doing so. Jesus makes this point clearly in verses 45-47. *“Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”*

Those demanding Jesus produce witnesses, now find themselves condemned by testimony they already possess—the writings of Moses (the Torah) which they hope will save them. Yet, they stand condemned when they are measured by the commandments (the Law) which God gave to Moses. Furthermore, in the famous passage in Deuteronomy 18:15-22 (which we read as our Old Testament lesson), Moses foretold that *“God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen.”* That prophet has come and is standing before them, and yet they will not listen to him. The Jews invoke the teaching of Moses against Jesus, all the while not realizing that every time they quote Moses, they are invoking Moses’ testimony against themselves. The Jews, Jesus says, do not even believe their own Scriptures. And Jesus would know, for he not only knows the hearts of all men, but he is the author of the words God gave to Moses. He is that one about whom Moses had been speaking.

There is a very basic theological principle in view here. Do not argue with God incarnate about how the Scriptures ought to be interpreted—they bear witness to him not to human tradition. Do not quote Moses while asking God incarnate to produce witnesses about his messianic mission—because Moses is his witness not yours. Do not accuse God incarnate of blasphemy when he is speaking the words of YHWH. And do not accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath—God works on the Sabbath and Jesus does too because he is God incarnate. Since the Jews accusing Jesus of these capital crimes did not understand Moses because they did not believe what Moses actually taught, they will never believe the words of Jesus—unless and until Jesus grants them the new birth, eternal life, and faith. The Jews may hope in Moses, but they don’t believe or understand him, and Moses, is God’s witness against them.

When Jesus tells the Jews *“you search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal*

life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life,” he is doing two things. He is teaching us how to read our Bibles—to look for his person and work on every page. But he is also telling us that when those Scriptures bear witness to him, we are to come to him so as to have eternal life. Let no one make the tragic mistake those hearing Jesus did on that day. Do not refuse his gracious invitation. For you have seen how the Scriptures bear witness to the person and work of Jesus. Come to him so that you may have life.