

“When the Christ Appears”

The Twenty-Sixth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of God

Texts: John 7:25-36; Micah 5:1-6

While he was ministering in Galilee, people saw Jesus heal the sick and cast out demons. They heard Jesus teach, and identified him as the great prophet foretold by Moses. When Jesus fed over five thousand people in the wilderness east of the Sea of Galilee, messianic fervor grew so intense that people wanted to make Jesus king. But six months later when Jesus went to Jerusalem during the Feast of Booths and began teaching in the temple, things were different. Some thought Jesus to be a good man. Others thought that Jesus was a dangerous false teacher. When Jesus revealed to the crowds who gathered to hear him teach that the religious leaders of Israel were plotting to kill him, some of those present alleged that Jesus was demon-possessed. As the events in John’s Gospel begin to point us toward the cross and the empty tomb, the critical question is now on everyone’s mind. Who is this man? Is he really the Christ?

As we work our way through the Gospel of John, we are in the seventh chapter and covering the initial exchanges between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders of Israel during the so-called “conflict phase” of Jesus’ messianic mission. The conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel—which is recounted in John chapters 7-10—takes place during the Feast of Booths. According to Josephus (the famed Jewish historian), this was the most popular of the three principle Jewish feasts. Coming close on the heels of the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Booths was established by God before Israel entered the promised land. Pilgrims came to Jerusalem from outlying areas (Judea and the Galilee) and the city was packed with people during the eight days of the Feast.

By the time of Jesus, the Feast of Booths was a national harvest festival celebrated after the fall crop of olives and grapes had been harvested (late October, early November). The Feast included a solemn water-pouring ritual and a lamp-lighting ceremony. Jesus will refer to both rituals as the conflict between himself and the Jewish leaders continues to escalate. The eight-day celebration of the Feast of Booths serves as the setting for the conflict which follows.

As we saw last time, Jesus was still in the Galilee region when his brothers (the younger biological children of Mary and Joseph) encouraged him to go to Jerusalem for the Feast with the intention of performing miracles—perhaps to regain some of the followers he had lost months earlier as a result of the “hard sayings” found in the “bread of life” discourse which Jesus had given while in the Galilee. In verses 3-4 of John 7, Jesus’ brothers told him, “*leave here [the Galilee region] and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.*” Jesus’ brothers were still unbelievers at this time, and they do not understand that it was not yet time for Jesus to go to Jerusalem. Jesus will go when it is his Father’s will that he go. His brothers went to the opening of the Feast without him.

After waiting several days, Jesus did go to the Feast, but entered the city unannounced and immediately went to the temple and began teaching. The Jewish leaders expected Jesus to return to Jerusalem during the Feast because a year or so earlier, Jesus miraculously healed a man on the Sabbath who had been an invalid for some thirty-eight years. The Jews were outraged when the man moved his bedroll after Jesus healed him—something which Jewish tradition regarded as a violation of the Sabbath (but which was not). When Jesus spoke of the resurrection, telling the Jews that God had given him authority to give life,

judge all men, and raise the dead, the Jews began plotting to kill Jesus, who they thought was blaspheming—which he was, if he was not who he claimed to be. The indication given us by John is that the Jewish leaders were hoping Jesus would return to Jerusalem during the Feast, so that they could arrest him and then put him to death.

Public opinion about Jesus was divided throughout Israel, but was especially polarized in Jerusalem. John informs us that some thought Jesus a good man, while others thought him a false teacher—and therefore a dangerous heretic. This is a bit different than things had been in the Galilee where many people identified Jesus as the prophet predicted by Moses, and after he fed the five thousand in the wilderness, many wanted to make Jesus king. Until returning to Jerusalem, Jesus' messianic mission was centered in Capernaum (in the Galilee region), and he had been teaching in the area for nearly a year. Therefore, messianic fervor seemed to be much stronger in Galilee, where people felt a greater messianic passion than did those Jews living in Jerusalem who would only have limited information about Jesus—and what they had was surely filtered by the Sanhedrin. But now Jesus' ministry will begin to focus exclusively in and around Jerusalem and the people of the Jerusalem will be forced to decide who Jesus is, and whether or not they will follow him. However, they cannot answer these questions until they determine who Jesus is, and discern the true meaning of his mission.

When we left off last time, Jesus was teaching in the temple area during the Feast. In verse 18, he told those listening to him, *“the one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood.”* Just like Israel's prophets, Jesus speaks only those words which YHWH has given to him to speak. But Jesus' authority is greater than that of a mere prophet—Jesus speaks with the Father's authority in a unique way, as though he was one with YHWH. And it should be clear from his actions, Jesus does not seek glory for himself, he seeks only to glorify his Father.

Jesus now asks the people a rhetorical question before declaring all those present to be law-breakers (and therefore guilty before God). *“Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?”* Jesus does two things here. First, he declares that none of those listening to him have kept the law of Moses—which surely came as a shock to those who thought that they were keeping the law properly by obeying the oral tradition as taught them by the scribes and Pharisees. Second, Jesus then speaks of the plot to kill him as proof that those who accuse him of being a law-breaker are themselves seeking to kill an innocent man—this demonstrates that Israel's religious leaders were engaging in gross hypocrisy. How widely this plot was known among the Jews in Jerusalem is not clear to us. But the crowds respond indignantly, telling Jesus *“you have a demon!”* and then asking *“who is seeking to kill you?”*

Jesus' response to this horrible accusation is to remind the people of what happened when he had been in Jerusalem previously. As we read in verse 21, *“Jesus answered them, ‘I did one work, and you all marvel at it.’”* Jesus is, of course, referring to the invalid he had healed the previous year which provoked the first confrontation with the Sanhedrin (recounted in John 5). Jesus continues to expose the hypocrisy of those Jews accusing him of breaking the Sabbath by healing this man—pointing out that the Jews themselves consider the weightier matters of the law, just as Jesus did, when they circumcise a male child on the eighth day (even if that day happens to be a Sabbath). *“Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment.”*

While the people do not see it, the traditions taught by the scribes and Pharisees actually obscured the holiness of the law (and of the law-giver) by distorting the true meaning of the law—which is a revelation of both the will and the holiness of YHWH. In Matthew 15:9, Jesus says of the scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem, “*in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*” Once the law of God has been interpreted through the lens of self-righteousness (as the Pharisees were doing), all that matters is external conformity to the commandment. If you don’t steal something with your hands (the Jews argued) then you had kept the law and were not guilty before God. What was completely omitted is the fact that to even desire someone else’s property in your heart, renders you as guilty before God as if you had taken their property with your hands. This is why Jesus rebukes the audience, and then informs them that they are using the wrong standard of judgment. The Jews are concerned about outward appearances. God is not.

At the heart of all forms of self-righteousness is a pre-occupation with what we think others will think about us. But God searches the human heart and he judges by the truth. God will not judge the Jews by whether or not they’ve kept the oral tradition of the Pharisees. He will judge them by whether or not they keep his commandments perfectly in thought, in word, and in deed. The problem with self-righteousness is that people can actually obey the traditions of the Pharisees (or of any religious group for that matter), and in doing so, deceive themselves into thinking that they have kept the law. Jesus strips away this false and dangerous error. This is why the religious people (observant Jews) were so offended by his teaching. Jesus exposes their self-righteousness and false piety for what it is—a manifestation of human sinfulness.

When Jesus raises the fact of the plot to kill him as proof of the hypocrisy of the Jews, the crowd reacts as recounted in verses 25-26. “*Some of the people of Jerusalem therefore said, ‘Is not this the man whom they seek to kill? And here he is, speaking openly, and they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ?’*” The situation in Jerusalem is different than it had been in the Galilee. In Jerusalem, Jesus faces a more hostile audience. Many of those present when Jesus preached may be acting as the eyes and ears of the Sanhedrin. We should also consider the fact that in Jerusalem itself, there are greater numbers of people who would be sympathetic to the religious leaders (who were quite powerful and always present) than there would be in outlying areas like the Galilee.

This is the first time the possibility that Jesus might be the Messiah is voiced in public in Jerusalem. But the incredulous tone of the questions which follow becomes evident when people in the crowd propose their own answer to this question. “*But we know where this man comes from, and when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from.*” Some historical background is necessary here because Jewish messianic expectations are complex we need to understand these expectations so as to make sense of the issues raised by the crowd.

Many of the Jews of Jesus’ day believed that the Messiah would be a flesh and blood human (no thought of an incarnate Savior) who would remain unknown to the people of God until he suddenly appeared at a moment of great crisis to bring about Israel’s redemption. No one would know who the Messiah is until he dramatically revealed himself. The Jews knew the messianic prophecy in Micah 5:2 (part of our Old Testament lesson) which foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Jesus had that going for him. But it was common knowledge that Jesus grew up in Nazareth, that his parents were Joseph (the carpenter) and Mary, that Capernaum was now his hometown, and that after John the Baptist had been put to death, Jesus became very well-known as a teacher and miracle-worker.

But none of what Jesus had done so far fit with current Jewish expectations. Therefore, in the minds of the people listening to Jesus, he could not be the Christ because people knew too much about him, and

this did not fit with their messianic expectations.¹ The reality is that people have been led astray by the scribes and Pharisees about what it meant to obey the law of Moses. It is also clear that the people had been given erroneous information about the coming of the Messiah—the man standing before them in the temple, not hidden, but teaching and performing miracles out in the open.

We should acknowledge that identifying Jesus as the Messiah would not have been easy under the circumstances. We have the benefit of the synoptic gospels, the epistles of the New Testament, and two thousand years of reflection upon how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy and slowly but progressively revealed himself to the Jews, who often reacted with great hostility. Ironically, much of Jesus' teaching in the temple was new to the people hearing him. They were working with false information given them by their leaders. Given the claims Jesus was making, and the hatred they felt for their Roman oppressors, passions were high and tempers were short.

Under such circumstances, Jesus could not walk into the temple and declare himself to be the Messiah, and then perform a miracle or two to prove it. Jesus must fulfill the righteous requirements of the law. He must obey his Father's will—which means humbling himself and becoming subject to the law. And, more importantly, he must go to the cross as the obedient and suffering servant to deliver us from the wrath of God. So, Jesus reveals who he is to his people, progressively, and according to the Father's direction. Revealing himself in the manner he does bring everything to fulfillment and exposes the false piety of the shepherds of Israel. His messianic mission is centered on the fundamental human problem—sin and guilt—and not on the false, but wide-spread assumption that the Messiah would deliver Israel from Rome. Jesus must accomplish all of these things in the right way and at the right time. We are witnessing this very thing in the pages of John's Gospel in the conflict between Jesus and Pharisees.

Upon hearing the crowd's response, Jesus responds in verse 28. *“So Jesus proclaimed, as he taught in the temple, ‘You know me, and you know where I come from. But I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true, and him you do not know.’”* The crowds have their facts right—but only up to a point. They know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, that he was raised in Nazareth, that he lived in Capernaum, and that he was going about preaching and performing miracles. What the crowds do not know is that Jesus has been sent to Israel to fulfill his messianic mission by none other than YHWH himself. Jesus is not a messianic pretender. The Jews do not know that Jesus was miraculously conceived in the womb of the virgin in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Messiah has come, and they cannot see it.

What comes as the shocker, however, is the reason why their messianic expectations are wrong. Jesus tells them, *He who sent me is true, and him you do not know.* In other words, the Jews have the right God in mind (the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) but they do not know him. Because the Jews do not believe in Jesus as the Son of God, they cannot understand the word of God which is being spoken to them by Jesus. This is but another way of saying that many of the people listening to Jesus preach are unbelievers—just like Jesus' own brothers. They see, but do not perceive. They hear, but do not understand. Their own Messiah has come to them. But they react to his teaching in anger, or they misunderstand him because of self-righteousness and unbelief. The people of Jerusalem do not know their own creator and redeemer despite the fact that their entire history and destiny as a nation is tied to the reality that they are the chosen and covenant people of God who will find their ultimate purpose in the coming of the Messiah. And when he came, they did not know the one who sent him.

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 318.

Jews took great pride that they were the chosen people of God—unlike the godless Gentiles who now oppressed them. Paul captures the Jewish attitude and the reality of their lack of faith quite well in Romans 2:17-20. “*But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth.*” By telling the people that YHWH is true, but that they do not know him, Jesus is telling them that they are just like the Romans whom they detest and to whom they often referred as “dogs.” To make sure that no one has missed this point, Jesus reiterates it in verse 29. “*I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me.*” The Jews are just like the Romans—they do not understand what the Scriptures teach about the coming of their own Messiah. The crowds may know Jesus’ personal history, but what they will not acknowledge is that he has been sent from YHWH, and that he truly is the Christ (the Messiah).

As we learn in verse 30, some in the crowd can stand no more—in their minds Jesus has gone too far. The reality is that sinful people hate being confronted in their sins by the holy God. “*So they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come.*” This seems to be a spontaneous act because of what Jesus has just said, and not a part of the Pharisees’ plot to have Jesus arrested.² John does not tell us how Jesus escaped from those trying to seize him, but does tell once again that Jesus’ hour had not yet come. There can be no doubt that as John looks back on these events (years later when he writes his Gospel) he sees how important it was that Jesus is obedient to the Father’s will in order to accomplish our salvation. Everything which transpires during Jesus’ messianic ministry has been ordained by God who directs all things (including the anger in the crowd and the attempt to seize Jesus) according to his sovereign purposes—he has even ordained that exact moment when Jesus will be arrested and then go to the cross.

Anger was not the only reaction found among those listening to Jesus. The power of Jesus’ words to bring life and raise the dead is also evident. According to verse 31, “*yet many of the people believed in him.*” The way Jesus taught, his appeal to the authority of YHWH, his complete mastery of the Old Testament, and because of the question which must have been on many a person’s mind, “*When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?*” There can be no doubt that based upon Jesus’ miracles alone, he had demonstrated himself to be the Messiah. Who else could perform the works he performed? When all of these things are taken together (Jesus’ authority coming from YHWH, his understanding of Scripture, and that his miracles are the proof that Jesus was who he claimed himself to be), there could be no other conclusion—Jesus is the Christ. While many of those who heard Jesus that day were angered by his teaching, others were convinced. John says they believed.

The Pharisees had made it plain that they did not want people talking about Jesus, yet here is Jesus in the temple teaching before an assembled crowd where there was heated public debate about who Jesus is and about the nature of his mission—despite the Pharisees’ insistence that no one talk about Jesus. John tells us in verse 32 that “*the Pharisees heard the crowd muttering these things about him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest him.*” The Pharisees thought it was time to execute their plot to kill Jesus—a plot which their supporters in the crowd vehemently denied existed. Apparently, the Pharisees prepared an arrest warrant, got the Sadducees to sign off on it (the chief priests were usually Sadducees) and then sent the temple police (Levites who were assigned the task of keeping order in the temple area) to have Jesus arrested. We will read of the outcome in more detail next time, Lord willing, but John will

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 318-319.

tell us in verses 44-46 that “*some of them wanted to arrest [Jesus] but no one laid hands on him. The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, ‘Why did you not bring him?’ The officers answered, ‘No one ever spoke like this man!’*” The time for Jesus to be arrested and put to death had not yet come. His words, not his miracles, prevented his arrest.

Meanwhile, in verses 33-34, John tells us what Jesus was telling the people even as the temple police were seeking to arrest him.³ The irony should not be missed. “*Jesus then said, ‘I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will seek me and you will not find me. Where I am you cannot come.’*” The Sanhedrin thinks this is the end for Jesus. And while they are planning to arrest him, Jesus tells the people that God’s timing is not their timing. Our Lord’s cross, resurrection, and ascension will come. But not yet. To those who know the gospels, and who are familiar with what is yet to come, these words from Jesus make perfect sense. But to those in Jerusalem who did not yet know that the authorities were coming to arrest Jesus, these words must have sounded utterly cryptic—as we will see in the crowd’s response in the following verses. But Jesus knows that his obedience will take him to the cross, and ultimately back to the Father, so that he might send the Holy Spirit. But this will not happen until the coming Passover when all of these things will be fulfilled.

Without the eyes of faith, Jesus’ reference to his coming death, resurrection, and ascension was completely misunderstood by the Jews. According to verses 35-36, “*The Jews said to one another, ‘Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? What does he mean by saying, ‘You will seek me and you will not find me,’ and, ‘Where I am you cannot come.’*” Where could Jesus go and not be found? Is he going to skip town so as to avoid arrest? Will he leave Judea and the Galilee and go somewhere else to teach? Will he find a Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jewish congregation in one of the large cities scattered around the Mediterranean (the Diaspora), like Alexandria, Antioch, Athens, or Rome and then teach among the Greek-speaking Jews? What does he mean that he will not be found? And that you cannot go where I am going?

Once again, those who know John’s Gospel see the irony in Jesus’ words and the people’s reactions. In John 12, we will learn that a number of Greeks (Gentile converts to Judaism) seek out Jesus during the coming Passover. After Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension (where we find the true meaning of that “going away” to which Jesus is referring) the Gospel will go into all the surrounding areas of the Jewish Diaspora—the very people to whom this Gospel is intended to convince that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God, who will deliver God’s people from the guilt and power of sin in his death and resurrection.

As we conclude this sermon, we must ask “what should we take with us from this text?” The focus of Jesus’ teaching in the temple (in light of the crowd’s reaction—some tried to seize Jesus, while others believed in him), is the question as to whether or not Jesus is the Christ (i.e., the Messiah). When the Christ appears how will God’s people know it is he? Based on Jesus’ ministry so far, we can say that we will know for the following reasons. 1). His teaching is grounded in the authority of YHWH, who gives Jesus words to say. 2). Through Jesus’ obedience to the law of God and the will of His Father. 3). His precise fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. 4). Based upon the miraculous signs which accompany Jesus’ teaching ministry and which confirm that Jesus’ teaching is from God. We know that Jesus is the Christ because of who he is, what he says, what he does, the authority he possesses, and the signs he performs to prove all of these things to be true.

³ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 320.