

Jesus and the Witnesses

Over the past few weeks we have the first four chapters of John's Gospel, full of life and hope and promise. Those chapters give us such rich, wonderful insights into the nature of Jesus and the Kingdom that He brought. It's like a dream come true, the hoped-for promise fulfilled, the longing realized.

As wonderful and exciting as the first four chapters are, there is a shift in chapter 5. In this chapter Jesus is clearly at odds with the religious establishment. They are convinced that all the troubles that had come on the Jewish people could find their source in their own failure to properly keep the fourth of God's Ten Commandments - "remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. Six days a week are set apart for your daily duties and regular work, but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to the LORD your God. On that day, no one in your household may do any kind of work." The reason these Jewish leaders were so uptight about Sabbath keeping was the fear that they would experience greater troubles if they failed to be diligent in keeping this command. So let's read:

Afterward Jesus returned to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish holy days. Inside the city, near the Sheep Gate, was the Pool of Bethesda, with five covered porches. Crowds of sick people - blind, lame or paralyzed - lay on the porches. One of the men lying there had been sick for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him and knew how long he had been ill, He asked him, "Would you like to get well?"

"I can't sir," the sick man said, "for I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred up. While I am trying to get there, someone else always gets in ahead of me."

Jesus told him, "Stand up, pick up your sleeping mat and walk."

Instantly the man was healed! He rolled up the mat and began walking! But this miracle happened on the Sabbath day. So the Jewish leaders objected. They said to the man who was cured, "You can't work on the Sabbath! It's illegal to carry that sleeping mat."

He replied, "The man who healed me said to me, 'Pick up your sleeping mat and walk.'"

"Who said such a thing as that?" they demanded.

The man didn't know, for Jesus had disappeared into the crowd. But afterward Jesus found him in the temple and told him, "Now you are well; so stop sinning, or something even worse may happen to you."

Then the man went to find the Jewish leaders and told them it was Jesus who had healed him. So the Jewish leaders began harassing Jesus for breaking the Sabbath rules. But Jesus replied, "My Father never stops working so why should I?" So the Jewish leaders tried all the more to kill Him. In addition to disobeying the Sabbath rules, He had spoken of God as His Father, thereby making Himself equal with God. (John 5:1-18)

Some quick thoughts on this story that introduces the long discussion about witnesses that follows.

1. It wasn't until very late in the 19th century that scholars were able to identify a pool in Jerusalem that fit John's description of the pool of Bethesda. But, during renovations to St. Ann's church in 1888, a pool was discovered that had five porches surrounding it. It was near the Sheep Gate, exactly where John located it.
2. The second thing to note is that Jesus asked the man an important question before He healed him. He said, "Would you like to get well?" You might think that's too obvious, that of course he would want to get well, but don't forget that there are some things that are attached to good health, like getting a job instead of begging. So Jesus doesn't assume that this man wants to be able to take on all the challenges of what we call normal life, but asks him what he really does want.
3. The third thing to notice is that John doesn't tell us which feast it is that Jesus was attending in Jerusalem. That's because the focus will not be on the feast, but on the fact that Jesus healed a man, and told him to carry his sleeping mat, on the Sabbath Day.
4. A fourth thing to notice is that the religious leaders aren't impressed with the miracle of healing that Jesus performed. They were not impressed to see someone who has been ill and immobilized for 38 years standing up and walking around with his sleeping mat under his arm. It's obvious to us that something amazing happened there, something that should be acknowledged, responded to, but they skip over the miracle in order to regain control.

The climax of this story comes, as it often does, right near the end. The Jewish leaders are giving Jesus a hard time for encouraging the man He had healed to break the rules. The rules, in this case, forbid anyone from doing work on the Sabbath and, at least according to one of the 1,521 rules that they used to legislate what behaviours were appropriate on the Sabbath, carrying your mat was against the law. When they started to give Jesus a hard time about it, He came back with one of the strangest and strongest statements about His own identity, one that would determine His relationship with the Jewish leaders from that point on: "My Father never stops working, so why should I?"

Why was that statement such a big deal? Because the rabbis had already discussed this issue at length and had concluded that God must always be at work in some sense because He kept the universe going. When Jesus said, "My Father never stops working", He was saying that His Father was God. And that is made explicitly clear in the next sentences where we are told that the Jewish leaders were now trying to kill Jesus - it's no longer harassment; they want Him dead - and that was because Jesus had done two things wrong: disobeying the Sabbath rules and making Himself equal with God. The road to Calvary starts early in John's Gospel, at chapter 5.

In the New Living Translation which I read this passage from, the translators say that the Jewish leaders began "harassing" Jesus and in other translations the word "persecute" is used. But another legitimate translation is the word "prosecute" - Jesus is now officially on trial. He is certainly being watched very carefully and those who oppose Him are always looking for evidence that they can use against Him.

In the face of this opposition to His claims and His purpose, Jesus defends Himself by naming several “witnesses”. As the law stated, Deuteronomy 19:15 and as Paul repeated in 2 Corinthians 13:1, every-thing was to be established on the basis of the testimony of two or three witnesses. Jesus names 5. And it reads like a defence at a trial. I think Jesus sees Himself as being prosecuted, as being on trial. The rest of John 5, from verse 19-47 is all red letters. I won’t read the whole of it, but I’ll select some passages in which Jesus defends Himself, in which He declares who He is and who will testify on His behalf.

1. Jesus’ first witness is God the Father. Verses 19-30 contain Jesus’ declaration that He only does what He sees the Father doing, that the Father loves the Son, that the Son consults the Father on all things and that, because of this, He has been given the right to judge. Jesus says that He, the Son, will do greater things than simply healing the crippled man lying by the pool of Bethesda and that they will be amazed at the things they see Him do, including raising the dead back to life. Now, imagine for a moment that you are one of the religious teachers of the Jews, entrusted with keeping the faith in the midst of dark times, and Jesus says this: *The Father leaves all judgment to His Son so that everyone will honour the Son, just as they honour the Father. But if you refuse to honour the Son, then you are certainly not honouring the Father who sent Him. I assure you, those who listen to My message and believe in God who sent Me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life. And I assure you that the time is coming; in fact it is here, when the dead will hear My voice, the voice of the Son of God. And those who listen will live. (22-25)* Could Jesus have made claims that were any more blatant or obvious than these? He is saying that He is God, giving life, forgiving, judging. Everything He’s talking about here is something that only God does - and Jesus says that He is authorized to do all these things and that He will do them right because He does only what He sees His Father doing.
2. The second witness that Jesus calls on is John the Baptist. He doesn’t say a lot about John, except that his witness was truth, that he preached the truth in what he said about Jesus. Then He makes two more statements about John that are interesting in the context of these arguments for the defence: a. Jesus says that, even though He has better witnesses than John the Baptist, He is reminding His accusers about John’s witness SO THAT they might be saved. Jesus is saying that these religious leaders, the teachers of the Jewish people, are themselves in need of salvation. They knew John, they sent observers out to the Jordan to hear what John was saying and to watch what he was doing. There was some level of respect there and Jesus is building a case for them to see that they were right to respect and learn from John’s witness. The second interesting statement comes in the next verse (5:35) where Jesus says, “John shone brightly for awhile and you benefited and rejoiced.” He’s urging them not to just dismiss John’s testimony, but to remember how they had been impressed with him, how he had kindled hope in their hearts, what they had learned from him, all reasons to take his testimony seriously.

3. In verse 36, Jesus moves on to the third witness in this series: *“But I have a greater witness than John - My teachings and My miracles. They have been assigned to Me by the Father and they testify that the Father has sent Me.”* Jesus doesn’t say anything about His miracles here except that they come from the Father. But they were a matter of public record. Multitudes of people had seen Jesus heal the sick and perform signs that are not within normal human ability to perform. Already He has turned water into wine and healed the official’s dying son; and those are just the stories John has recorded for us. Much more had already taken place, like the healing of the paralytic in Capernaum which we read about in Mark 2 or the leper in Mark 1. So Jesus’ miracles speak, but only to those who have ears to hear. Earlier in this chapter he had healed a paralyzed man who was lying by the waters of Bethesda, but the religious leaders had failed to acknowledge that as a miracle, instead focusing on the fact that it was performed on the Sabbath. So Jesus takes the time here to remind them that what they have witnessed should not be simply dismissed, but is, in fact, a sign that the Father is with Him. The emphasis in this third section of testimony is the same as the first: what you have seen (the miracles) are evidence that the Father is with Jesus. Let me read verses 37 & 38: *The Father Himself has also testified about Me. You have never heard His voice or seen Him face to face and you do not have His message in your hearts, because you do not believe Me - the One He sent to you.* That’s a call to the religious leaders of the Jews to face the evidence that Jesus is operating under the will and the power of the God they are supposedly serving.
4. The fourth piece of evidence comes in the very next verse: *You search the Scriptures because you believe they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to Me! Yet you refuse to come to Me so that I can give you this eternal life.* It’s so interesting how we can become so focused on something that is associated in some way with doing the right thing that we can miss the right thing, even when it’s right in front of us. These people Jesus is addressing in these verses are the guardians of the Jewish law and traditions. They are the ones with perhaps the greatest vested interest in knowing someone who has been sent by God, but they are not getting it. They know their Scriptures. They have studied and memorized large portions of them. They have also spent great time and effort in interpreting the law and the prophets in a way that can be used to guide the people in their daily lives. But Jesus is right! The Scriptures point to Him. But there is a barrier there between studying the Scriptures and applying them to the situation that is facing them and that barrier doesn’t allow them to see that Jesus has come from God and so - despite the testimony of John the Baptist and the testimony of Jesus and His miracles and the testimony of the Scriptures that point to Him - they can’t see the face of God in the man in front of them. In the next few verses, Jesus accuses them of having a love deficit - He says that they don’t have God’s love within them - and so they can’t honour the One who has been sent by God.
5. I’m going to say that Moses is the fifth witness Jesus calls on, although you could also include this in number 4. *“It is not I who will accuse you of this before the Father. Moses will accuse you! Yes, Moses, on whom you set your hopes. But if you had believed Moses, you would have believed Me because he wrote about Me. And since you don’t believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?”* At the

heart of Jewish religion was the law of Moses. The law was given at their deliverance from slavery, at the time they became a nation. The law set them apart from all other peoples on earth. The law gave them an identity beyond slavery into being the people of God. Their rebellion against the law had been the cause of every disaster that had befallen them and their willingness to repent and submit to God's law had resulted in blessing. And Jesus tells them that their great failure in their study of the law has been the failure to recognize that Moses pointed the way forward to the coming of Jesus. They were clinging to the past instead of believing the long ago promise of God's Deliverer coming to them - and so they had missed Him.

John 5 is an interesting chapter, with lots of dynamics at play and a variety of messages that we can learn from and apply. I'm going to end by looking at just 2:

1. The world - and by that I mean, as I've said before, those forces at work in this earth that oppose the rule of God and the establishment of His Kingdom - the world is always putting Jesus on trial. The world is always looking for reason to disbelieve Him, to not have to take Him seriously, to discredit the biblical accounts about His life or to cast doubts on His relevance for today or His ability to keep His promises. Some scholars believe that John 5 marks the beginning of the prosecution, the trial of Jesus that isn't completed until Jesus is sentenced to crucifixion in John 19. That would mean that 70% of the Gospel is Jesus on trial - quite a come down from the promise of life and light and joy that we started with in the first four chapters. The point is that we need to have our eyes and ears open to the agenda that wants to minimize Jesus' claims. We need to be aware that this is Satan's plan and that it will continue to surface in some form or other. Don't get thrown by it. Don't become filled with doubt because someone claims to know that Jesus wasn't who He claimed to be. Remember the words of the Temple guards who were sent to arrest Jesus by the religious leaders and who came back empty-handed: "No one ever spoke like this man." No one ever has. It is Jesus who spoke the words of truth and life that have changed the world in so many wonderful ways and it's His words that we need to listen to now. So, here's the practical advice: either tune it out, if you can, or get after the truth by researching people of wisdom and integrity who can guide you to understanding.
2. The second application is to be careful that we don't substitute religion for our relationship with God through Jesus. Religion is so deceptive because it seems so right. You do the right things at the right times in the right way and you'll be all right. But within that little sentence you see a huge problem. It's all about you, your ability to know and to do what's right, your performance of your duties and your self-improvement in the sight of God. Where is the relationship? Where is the "walk humbly with your God" that the prophet Micah wrote about? Try to find a passage from the Gospels where Jesus said, "I've come so that you can be better people." Instead, you find, "I've come so that those who are sick can be made well and those who are spiritually dead can find life." What we have in Jesus is so precious. What we find in religion, in duty, in rules, deadens us to the life of joy, the fullness of the Spirit, and the freedom of forgiveness. Don't become self-absorbed in your pursuit of Him; don't let religion rob you of intimacy with your God.