



Catalog No. 1359

John 7:1-36

Twenty-first Message

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April 10th, 2005

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS

At times in the gospels Jesus is portrayed as very compassionate and loving. But he also had a way of testing men's desires, revealing his true followers from those who were merely looking for a miracle worker. In particular, he spoke hard words to people who were steeped in religious pride. His intent was quite clear: He came to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

The gospel of John tells the story of a compassionate Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding for a hard-pressed couple. In Samaria, he reaches out to a woman of questionable character. He heals a royal official's son, and a man who had been lame for thirty-eight years. He feeds the multitude which had been following him but forgets to pack a lunch. Even though all of these encounters or miracles are steeped in Old Testament significance, they reveal a heart of grace and mercy.

On the other hand, Jesus does and says things that create division and hostility. He cleanses the temple, has a candid conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus, and speaks hard words following his healing of the paralytic and the feeding of the multitude. It's obvious that the tension is escalating between him and the religious authorities. By the end of chapter 6, many of his disciples had forsaken him.

In chapter 7 we find that the authorities at last decide to seize and kill Jesus. In between two worlds, darkness now seeks to destroy light.

After these things Jesus was walking in Galilee, for He was unwilling to walk in Judea because the Jews were seeking to kill Him. Now the feast of the Jews, the Feast of Booths, was near. Therefore His brothers said to Him, "Leave here and go into Judea, so that Your disciples also may see Your works which You are doing. For no one does anything in secret when he himself seeks to be known publicly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world." For not even His brothers were believing in Him. So Jesus said to them, "My time is not yet here, but your time is always opportune. The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil. Go up to the feast yourselves; I do not go up to this feast because My time has not yet fully come." Having said these things to them, He stayed in Galilee. (John 7:1-9 NASB)

"After these things" is John's usual transitional phrase indicating sequence. Jesus is still in Galilee. He has avoided Judea because, ever since he healed on the Sabbath and claimed that

God was his Father, the Jews were seeking to kill him (5:18). He has been in Galilee for about a year, but that will soon change.

The Feast of Booths is near and his brothers are urging him to go up to Jerusalem. We have already seen that these feasts form the major structural component of the book, especially chapters 5 through 10. Sabbath is the context of chapter 5; Passover the context of chapter 6; the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles is the context of chapters 7 and 8, perhaps even chapter 9.

Tabernacles was one of the three great festivals in the Jewish calendar (Exod 23:16; Lev 23:33-36, 39-43; Deut 16:13-15); the others were Passover and Pentecost. During these feasts, pilgrims came from all over to celebrate in Jerusalem. Every male was required to appear at these three annual celebrations. For seven days during Tabernacles the Jews lived in booths made with branches of palm trees and willows. A special festival was held on the eighth day. The feast was connected to the Exodus, when the Israelites wandered in the wilderness and lived in booths or tents. It was celebrated at harvest time. Therefore, the events of chapter 7 take place about six months after the feeding of the multitude at Passover, in chapter 6.

Tabernacles was the most popular, holiest and greatest feast of all. It was a time of great rejoicing, when everyone played instruments, sang and danced. The Mishnah says that "he who has not seen rejoicing at Tabernacles has never seen rejoicing." Numerous sacrifices were offered; no one was to come empty-handed. Everyone was welcomed and accepted, even the poor. More than seven thousand priests and one thousand Levites ministered at the event. So well attended was the feast that in AD 66, an entire city traveled to Jerusalem, leaving only 50 people in the town. Water and light formed the two major components of the feast, and Jesus will use both of these elements as metaphors for himself.

His brothers urge him to go to Jerusalem for the festival. At this point these four, the sons of Joseph and Mary, are unbelievers. Their motive is obvious. Jesus' fame was spreading. His miracles were drawing big crowds. But then he had gone wild, telling all these people about eating his flesh. The crowds got smaller. His brothers were trying to stem a larger-scale defection. Jesus wasn't getting much exposure in Galilee, so they want him to go to the feast and promote himself before the cause was entirely lost. All the media would be there. A couple

of miracles at Tabernacles and Jesus could recover the ground he had lost.

Jesus responds to his brothers' urging by saying that his time had not yet fully come. This sounds a bit like what he had told his mother at a wedding. "Time" could be referring to his death, but he usually used the word "hour" for that. He might just be saying that wasn't the right time to go to the feast.

Jesus says that he is not going up, but then the next verse says he actually does. He probably meant that he would not be going up at the time his brothers said he should. Jesus marches to the beat of a different drummer. He will go up at the right time. In other passages, the words "going up," are used to indicate his ascending to the Father after his death (3:13; 6:62; 20:17).

In 1938, Orson Welles performed on radio an adaptation of H.G. Wells' book, *The War of The Worlds*, the story of a Martian invasion of earth. The book set the tone for science fiction literature in the 20th century. Welles' radio adaptation had news broadcasters breaking into the drama, giving updates on the Martians' fictitious landing in the United States. It sounded so real that many people thought these events were actually occurring. Cars jammed the roads. People hid in cellars, loaded their guns, and even wrapped their heads in wet towels to protect themselves from Martian poison gas. They were oblivious to the fact that they were acting out the role of the panic-stricken public who actually belonged in a radio play.

Well, the Martians didn't invade the United States. But God did invade the world, and it too caused quite a reaction. What we are beginning to see in this gospel is the confrontation between two worlds. We notice this in the dialogue between Jesus and his brothers, and we will see it now more acutely in the interaction between him and the religious authorities. The word "world" is a very important theological term for John. It is found 78 times in his gospel and 23 times in his first epistle. In most usages it is referring not to creation or the universe, but to the created order that is without God and is in rebellion against him. In the incarnation, the kingdom of God invaded the kingdom of the world. The world seeks its own glory. It hates Jesus because he exposes its evil and darkness.

Jesus tells his brothers that their time is not his time. They are operating in two different worlds. They are pushing him to seek his own glory, but he refuses. He waits for the Father's will. His actions are not determined by public opinion. He declines to act at the instigation of others, but acts in his own way, in his own time, according to the purposes of the Father. The brothers can go to the feast whenever they want. It doesn't matter, because what they do in their time has no purpose or meaning. Their time is insignificant because they belong to the world and the world loves its own (15:19).

But there is a new time, God time, and it confronts world time. This time of God's reign will be established when Jesus "goes up" or is "lifted up," to use John's language. The cross

makes it possible for us to live in this new time. When we believe in Jesus, we are transferred from world time to God's time, and that time is not meaningless. In God's time we have purpose and meaning, because God's time looks to the real end, which is his glory.

The kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world are mutually exclusive. We cannot live in both at the same time. This interaction between Jesus and his brothers forces us to ask ourselves serious questions. Do we operate our lives in concert with the world – the way it thinks and responds – or in concert with the will of God? Do we determine our actions based on what other people tell us to do or do we wait on God? Do we seek our own glory or God's? If we live in concert with the world, then our time is meaningless. We can do whatever we want; it won't matter. The world will love us, but life will have no purpose. If we seek the glory of God and live in God time, however, then our life has purpose. We don't quit our jobs and take off to the mission field. We seek the glory of God in our job and in our community. That is when our time and our life become meaningful.

After I had worked for a couple of years as an engineer, I decided to attend law school. A relatively new Christian, I wanted to do something more significant for God. But shortly after starting law school it became apparent to me that I was using God's name but seeking my own glory. My life was beginning to disintegrate into world time. My relationship with God and my wife began to erode. It was humbling for me to quit law school, but I needed to get back into God time.

I have been thinking a lot about my friend Pat Harrison. This week marks the fourth anniversary of his wife Anne's going to be with the Lord. When Anne passed away, Pat was propelled into a different time and a different world. I don't know of anyone who is more aware of what is happening around him than Pat. He sees and hears things that most of us don't notice. He lives in God time. This is what Jesus calls us to do as well.

John's text also poses an important question for the church. In many ways the church operates just like the world, like the brothers of Jesus, seeking to be popular and attract more people. Sadly, the church can easily operate in world time, employing the techniques and strategies of the world to be more successful. This is not the way God intended it to function. The church is an organism, the body of Christ. It's not an organization. It functions best when every member is using his or her gifts to the building up of the whole. Much of the time this doesn't look slick or impressive, but the Scriptures are clear as to how the church is to live in God time. If the church is not careful it will not seek God's glory but its own.

At last, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for the feast.

But when His brothers had gone up to the feast, then He Himself also went up, not publicly, but as if, in secret. So the Jews were seeking Him at the feast and were saying, "Where is He?" There was much grumbling among the

crowds concerning Him; some were saying, “He is a good man”; others were saying, “No, on the contrary, He leads the people astray.” Yet no one was speaking openly of Him for fear of the Jews. (7:10-13)

According to John’s account, when Jesus goes up to Jerusalem, he leaves Galilee for the last time. But he goes privately, so as not to make a show. A grand entrance at the beginning might have provoked a premature triumphal entry. Jerusalem was filled with anticipation; everyone was looking for him. They wanted miracles, not life-changing lessons from him. “Where is Jesus?” they asked. People are always asking that question; they have difficulty finding him.

Notice there are two groups – the Jews and the crowds. The Jews, the religious authorities, are hostile. They have already decided what they want to do and are hoping that the festival will entice Jesus out of Galilee. They want to draw him into a public debate so they can gather evidence to kill him.

The crowds are divided in their opinions about Jesus. Some think he is all right; others say he deceives people. There is much grumbling and murmuring. The people are acting just like Israel did in the wilderness during the Exodus. Because they are afraid of the Jews they are not speaking with boldness, but in a whisper.

The rest of the chapter breaks down into two cycles, each having three components. Jesus teaches, his teaching calls forth debate and speculation, and the leadership seeks to arrest Jesus. The first cycle is found in vv. 14-36, the second in vv. 37-52.

But when it was now the midst of the feast Jesus went up into the temple, and began to teach. The Jews then were astonished, saying, “How has this man become learned, having never been educated?” So Jesus answered them and said, “My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself. He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who is seeking the glory of the One who sent Him, He is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him. (7:14-18)

Jesus makes a public appearance in the midst of the feast. He goes to the temple and begins teaching. It was common practice for rabbis to teach their followers at the temple. Obviously, he doesn’t want to remain incognito. He is initiating the action.

He addresses two issues, the first of which concerns his authority. The Jews were amazed at his teaching because he had not been trained in a rabbinical center. The rabbis always appealed to tradition and precedent for their authority, but the only authority Jesus claims is that of his Father. His teaching was not his own; it was his Father’s.

Jesus charges that if the crowd is really serious about God, then they will know from whence his teaching comes. If they will do God’s will, obey his word and not seek their own glory,

then they will know that his teaching is true. They cannot assess him properly, so they reject him because they are seeking their own glory or praise from one another. Jesus, on the other hand, works for the glory of the One who sent him, and as a result he can be trusted.

How can we know that Jesus is from God and that what he says is from God? How can we understand God’s revelation, or even God himself? It cannot be proved. God cannot be summoned to a court of law.

Suppose you were lost and you asked for directions. How would you know that what you heard was true? You would do what you were told and soon you would know. Suppose you were stranded in a boat at sea and the captain told you that to survive you had to follow his orders completely. How would you know that he could guide you out of trouble? You would have to obey his word.

It is the same with the teaching of Jesus. When someone becomes a believer and begins to obey the word of Jesus, his or her life begins to change right before your eyes. The changed life validates the teaching. Sometimes when we don’t obey and suffer the consequences, this also validates Jesus’ teaching.

Jesus says that only the one who does God’s will can know whether his teaching is from God or from himself. As we believe and obey his word we find confirmation that what he says is true. God’s word rings true; it validates the truth. If we try to validate Jesus’ claims by reference to some generally accepted criteria, we return to the world time and lose our ability to discern God’s revelation. Believing means that we have to abandon human ability to reason in order to come to Jesus. Those who believe and begin to obey know they are in touch with light and truth. They cannot prove the truth, but their lives bear witness to it.

The second issue that Jesus raises in his teaching is the question of Moses’ authority.

“Did not Moses give you the Law, and yet none of you carries out the Law? Why do you seek to kill Me?” The crowd answered, “You have a demon! Who seeks to kill You?” Jesus answered them, “I did one deed, and you all marvel. For this reason Moses has given you circumcision (not because it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and on the Sabbath you circumcise a man. If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath so that the Law of Moses will not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made an entire man well on the Sabbath? Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.” (7:19-24)

The Jews claim the authority of Moses, so Jesus appeals to Moses to point out their hypocrisy. They do not believe Jesus because they do not do God’s will. They do not even obey Moses, since they want to murder Jesus, thereby breaking the law. The crowd responds by saying that Jesus is demon-possessed or insane.

But Jesus takes the offensive and puts them on the spot. He raises the healing of the lame man in chapter 5 in order to prove his point. That is what the “this” is referring to in verse 22.

Circumcision was the covenant sign that God made with Abraham and formalized through Moses. Every male was circumcised on the eighth day. If that day fell on Sabbath, then the Jews broke the law and performed the circumcision. They established a hierarchy of precedence. Jesus did the same thing when he healed the paralytic on the Sabbath, but the Jews were angry at him. They applied the law differently for Jesus than for themselves. The law is about leading people to life. Jesus brings life on the Sabbath. But the religious authorities are trying to kill him. He concludes by telling them to stop judging by appearances and judge by what is right. They should not make deductions on the face of things but by what is behind the law.

Jesus’ teaching points out two very important dangers that the church must seek to avoid. First, as we have already discussed, if the church lives in world time and seeks its own glory, it will employ the world’s techniques. The church ceases acting on faith, with the result that it cannot receive the words of Jesus as authoritative in the lives of God’s people. Churches all around the world do this because they don’t want to obey what Jesus says. So they look for an authority that will allow them to do what they want. When this happens, the church loses its power, its authority and its witness and becomes no different from the world.

The second danger that the church must avoid at all costs is making law and religious externals more important than life.

Jesus came to heal and to bring life, but the religious world of his day sought to snuff out this life. The same thing can happen in the church. When law becomes more important than people, when order and decorum and upholding externals become more important than hearts, the life of God is suppressed. People find no healing, and churches become cemeteries.

Here is what Brennan Manning has to say about this: “Unfortunately, religion readily lends itself to legalistic misunderstanding. A reliance on ceremonies and the observance of commandments too easily leads to a false trust in the external elements of religion and creates a mystique of spiritual superiority. Does the neutral onlooker identify a Christian by his pious practices and cultic regularity or by the loving quality of his everyday presence in the workaday world?”¹

My wife and I were watching a movie the other night in which a young woman reached out to show compassion for a drunk. She wasn’t put off by appearances or the risk of touching someone who was unclean. My wife commented, “That’s Jesus.”

Every time we go to a meeting or a Bible study we can become so consumed with doing what is right that we miss life. We go through familiar religious motions but fail to see what God is doing. We substitute form for substance. We are so concerned with what people think of us that we don’t risk. Jesus urges us to live in God time, looking for opportunities for life in every situation so that people can be touched by God, embraced by love, and be healed.

1. Brennan Manning, *A Glimpse of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 2004), 11-12.