

Jesus on Trial John 5:31-47

Call: Ps 95:1-7 (adapted)

Scripture: Hebrews 1:1-4 (ESV)

I. Introduction

I have called the title of this sermon, “Jesus on Trial.” Many of you probably think we’ve skipped to the end of the Gospel when Jesus is on trial before his crucifixion. But, no. I borrowed this title from A E Harvey, a former professor at Oxford, who wrote a book with this title in the 1970s. In his book, he makes the argument that the fourth Gospel is one long trial of Jesus. I agree with him. And the trial really picks up steam in chapter five which is where we are. Ultimately, John presents his Gospel this way so that we, readers, will listen to all the testimonies throughout the book and in the end, we will have to pronounce our verdict.

Let’s Pray and ask the Spirit’s help this morning. Father, as we come to your text this morning, we invite your Spirit to come and grow our roots downward so that our fruit will grow upward. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Let me remind you of our context. I’ve given an outline to chapter 5 in the Worship Guide for your reference. We are in chapter 5 for the third week. In the first 15 verses, Jesus miraculously healed a lame man by the pool of Bethesda. Jesus had curiously asked the man if he wanted to get well. The man did not say yes, but seemed to offer excuses for why he was still unwell. Jesus, not put off by the man’s excuses and in sheer grace, heals him. It turns out that it is on the Sabbath. And when the Religious authorities understand what has happened, that the man was healed on the Sabbath and was carrying his mat on the Sabbath, they begin prosecuting Jesus, verse 16. The Jewish authorities begin bringing formal charges against Jesus. The trial has begun even without a courtroom. That’s because in the Biblical world, a courtroom was not needed for a trial, or even a sentencing or a stoning.

Jesus for his part, enters his initial defense. He says, verse 17, *“My Father is working until now, and I am working.”* Jesus is claiming a special relationship with God the Father, which leads to 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.”*

If Jesus’ defense is untrue then he has committed blasphemy which he would have known is punishable by death. Last week, in verses 19-30 in his opening statement, we saw Jesus fill in the details of his defense, which is his opening statement. Mostly his defense lies in his dependent unity with God the Father. But, it’s because of this dependent unity that he can do the works of God, including giving life and pronouncing judgment. In other words, Jesus claims to be the source of all life and the judge of all the world. His claims mean that all people throughout history, you and I included, are headed toward a meeting with him.

Now if you would have been there and heard these audacious claims, don't you think you would have wanted evidence? After all "claims require proof; assertions require evidence; defense requires testimony" (Bruner, 334). Specifically, it was Moses back in Deuteronomy who said, "A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Deut 19:15). So Jesus, knowing this is the expectation, calls his witnesses. What is interesting is that at the end of our text today, Jesus will walk across the courtroom and become the prosecution. But, let's first hear from his witnesses.

I invite you into our text this morning, chapter 5, beginning in verse 31.

II. The Defense: The Witnesses (31-40)

31 If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. 32 There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. 33 You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. 34 Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. 35 He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. 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. 37 And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, 38 and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. 39 You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, 40 yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

A. The Introduction (31)

The word witness or testimony, same word in the Greek, is used ten times in these verses, pointing to the main theme of these verses.

Jesus begins by stating matter-of-factly that his witness about himself is insufficient on its own. Jesus knows the law, and it stipulated that every matter must be settled by at least two or three witnesses, and the person making the claims cannot be one of those witnesses.

B. Witness #1: The Father (32)

Jesus calls his first witness to the stand. It is the "another" in verse 32. I take this to be His Father in whom he is in dependent unity. Jesus will come back to the Father in verse 37, and we'll talk about that when we get to that verse.

C. Witness #2: The Baptist (33-35)

Jesus then calls his second witness to the stand, and it is John the Baptist. The beginning of the Christian story is not Jesus, but John the Baptist. All four Gospels and the sermons in Acts point to the fact that it was impossible to tell the story of Jesus without John the Baptist.

In this Gospel, John's primary job is to be a witness. Back in the prologue, John was said to have been "*sent from God... as a witness, to bear witness about the light*" (1:6-7). This was his

job! When the narrative then began, we found John in the wilderness baptizing. If you remember, these Jewish leaders had sent an envoy to interrogate him. Jesus says here that you leaders, by sending that envoy, recognize the truth of John's witness.

However, Jesus says that John's witness is insufficient in and of itself because John is merely a man. Although sent from God, he is not from above, something he himself declared in chapter 3, in the bride and bridegroom passage.

Jesus then describes John in terms of a lamp. He wasn't any old lamp, he was a divinely ordained one. His light shone for a time but it had run its course. And, people, including these religious leaders actually rejoiced in the light for awhile, probably alluding to the excitement that surrounded John's ministry.

I think what Jesus is saying here is this:

"You got excited for John during his ministry and for good reason. He was a prophet and spoke truth to you. But, you entirely missed the point of John's ministry. You completely missed John's entire mission. You missed the object of his mission which was me! John pointed to me as *"the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."* And, that is high salvation language, but you missed it" (John 1:29).

D. Witness #3: The Works (36)

In verse 36, Jesus calls the third witness to the stand, the works the Father has given him to do. These works, Jesus says, are the Father's works given to Jesus to be completed through him.

This at least refers to his miracles, what John calls signs in this Gospel. If you remember back with Nicodemus, he recognized this. Remember he began the conversation by saying, *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him"* (3:2). These signs bear witness to who Jesus is. In the water into wine, Jesus is making all things new. The old religion is done, and the new wine has come. In the healing of the official's son, Jesus is the one who has power over death. No doctor had the cure, but Jesus did. Jesus was the cure! In the healing of the lame man, Jesus is the one who can restore people to wholeness, both spiritually and physically. Next week, we will study the feeding of the 5,000. These signs, given by his Father, are a primary witness to who Jesus is.

But, these works from the Father can also be understood as Jesus' entire mission, even up until today, as Jesus said, *"My Father is working until now, and I am working."*

I think it's good for us to hear these words speaking into our time, especially in 2020. We all know how difficult a year it has been, with the pandemic, racial tensions, fires and now the political anxiety coming with the election. And, all that is not to mention the normal brokenness and chaos which fills the news everyday. We can sometimes feel like God has abandoned this world. But no. In the midst of all this chaos, all this uncertainty, all this anxiety, the Father and the Son are still at work. They are still working in dependent unity, and usually through his people.

There are very public ways they are working, like at a murder trial I think in late last year – maybe you remember this, maybe not. This was a powerful Gospel moment. A police officer in Texas had mistakenly walked into the wrong apartment, saw a man she didn't recognize and pulled out her gun and tragically shot the man to death. After the officer was sentenced to 10 years in prison, the man's 18-year-old brother was called to the stand to give a "victim impact statement." He took a deep breath and said these words to his brother's murderer, "I know I can speak for myself in saying that I forgive you... I think giving your life to Christ would be the best thing that [my brother] would want for you," he told her. "I love you as a person, and I don't wish anything bad on you" This 18-year-old young man then asked the judge if he could hug her, which the judge allowed him to do.

(<https://www.dallasnews.com/news/2019/10/02/two-stunning-hugs-end-amber-guygers-trial-merciful-note/> , accessed 10/21/20).

But, not even in very public ways, the Father and Son and Spirit are still working in this world through all of you. Wherever you go tomorrow morning, whether that be to a school or to a hospital or to a tech company or even walking into a different room to care for your children. God is working in every sector of society through all of you. He is not only at work through pastors and so-called Christian workers. He is working in and through each of you in the "secular" world. And, your work witnesses to who Jesus is.

Catherine of Sienna, who lived through much chaos in the 14th century, was known to receive Words from the Lord. She once received this Word, "There are many roads and ways I use, through love alone, to lead [humanity] back to grace." Those roads many times go through us, the church, his hands and feet, when we choose to love and forgive, seeking the best for the other. Yes God is still at work in this world.

E. Witness #1 (Again, 37-38)

In verses 37-38, Jesus calls his first witness back to the stand, His Father. The Father bears witness to the Son. What specifically is Jesus referring to? Well, we're not told. Maybe it's specifically the voice at Jesus' baptism, or the voice at the Transfiguration, but neither event is narrated in John? So, maybe what is in view here is all of Jesus' life, which is an activity of the Father, because they are in dependent unity.

Jesus then goes on the offensive, rebuking these Jewish leaders. They have never heard the voice of the Father nor seen his face nor have his Word in them. How can he say this? Well, they are hearing the voice of God right now. And, they are seeing the face of God right now, yet are choosing to reject the voice and the face right now.

F. Witness #4: The Scriptures (39-40)

Jesus then calls the fourth witness to the stand, the Scriptures. In calling the Scriptures to the stand, Jesus also stays on the offensive. These religious leaders have missed the entire point of Scripture.

To appreciate the power of this indictment, we need to understand the reverence these men had for the Scriptures. These Religious leaders held the Scriptures so sacred they thought the scrolls and words on the scrolls brought life!

An example might be this. When a scribe would copy the Scriptures, he was not allowed to write more than one letter before looking back to the text. One letter! Rabbi Hillel later wrote in his list of maxims:

More flesh, more worms;

More wealth, more care;

...

More Torah, more life.

Whoso hath gained a good name, hath gained it for himself.

Whoso hath gained the words of the Torah,

Hath gained for himself life in the world to come.

The Scribes and authorities always had their noses in the book, but they never got beyond the words. And they missed God when he arrived. As Hebrews says, *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,”* but all the prophets anticipated the ultimate revelation, God’s Son (Heb 1:1). All their studies were worthless if they did not understand that the entire Hebrew Scriptures pointed forward to Jesus. He is on every page of what we call the Old Testament. In fact, the Scriptures were given to prepare the world for him.

The Hebrew Scriptures are given to you to lead you to him, that you may find life through him, not them.

You know there are many stories in the Bible which you wish you could have been there to see: the Exodus, the walls of Jericho falling, of course in this Gospel already, I’d like to see all those signs. But, one story which may not immediately come to mind is the Road to Emmaus in Luke 24 (Luke 24:13-35). After the resurrection, two followers of Jesus were walking down the road deep in discussion, when Jesus, out of nowhere, joins them. They don’t recognize him, but in their discussions on that road, *“beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus explained to them all the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures”* (Luke 24:27). I wish I’d have been there for that discussion.

The entire Old Testament points to Jesus! So Jesus tells these Jewish Authorities, stop worrying about the jot and tittle, and raise your gaze to where the jot and tittle point!

There is a warning here for us, especially at a Bible church. We do intense study of Scripture here, which we definitely don’t want to minimize. But, may we never forget that our devotion to the Scriptural Word is not the end, but a means to the end. Mastery of the Scriptures at a literary level is not the point. The end is “knowing Jesus and making him known.” That’s the end goal. We want to know Jesus through the Scriptural word, and find life through him, which

is exactly where Jesus ends this section. We must come to him to receive life (40). Come and see him!

Well, that's Jesus defense. He now goes on the offensive, becoming the prosecution, and gives two more reasons why these leaders are rejecting him, verses 41-47.

III. The Prosecution: The Reasons for Rejection (41-47)

41 I do not receive glory from people. 42 But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. 43 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. 44 How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? 45 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. 46 For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. 47 But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

A. Vainglory (41-44)

More strong words from Jesus. In these verses, Jesus rebukes these leaders in two more ways.

First of all, they are living for glory from people. They are people-pleasers, not God pleasers. On the other hand, Jesus does not live to receive human glory in the sense of accreditation or affirmation. As he says elsewhere, he does not seek his own glory, but the glory of his Father (John 8:50).

And, I think here he pinpoints the heart of the issue. These leaders are seeking glory from men versus glory from God. They want the praise from men now, not the praise of God in heaven. At the root, it's pride. The old word is vainglory. As Raymond Brown says, "The failure to believe is really a preference for self" (Brown, 228). Belief is a journey into Jesus. Unbelief is a journey into self. Unbelief is a love of self. These leaders know the Scriptures backwards and forwards and why? Not to know God and love God, but simply for their own glory and fame. It's pride. As Paul will say in Corinthians though, "Knowledge puffs up, love builds up" (1 Cor 8:1). As Jesus says here, the ultimate evidence of their pride is their lack of love, specifically for God. They indeed love the darkness instead of the light (John 3:19).

As Mickey Klink says, In some ways, "humanity is the greatest irony of history: While God loved us and sent his son for us, we loved ourselves (John 3:16). And, while we sacrifice everything else for ourselves, God sacrifices himself for us" (Klink). Only when we humble ourselves and turn to Jesus will we journey out of ourselves.

B. Moses' Words (45-47)

Well, Jesus closes his sermon with a second rebuke by going back to Scripture. And, he brings Moses into the conversation. Remember Moses is the ultimate authority in the minds of these leaders.

And, speaking of Moses, he wasn't about glorifying himself was he? Only two people in all of Scripture have been described as meek or humble, Moses and Jesus (Num 12:3; Matt 11:29). Moses was even said to be the humblest man of his time.

But Jesus' point is that Moses wrote about him. Moses wrote about Jesus. And, we ask, but where did Moses write about Jesus? Jesus doesn't specify, but we are on solid ground with at least these specific references:

1. In Genesis 3, in the so-called proto-evangelium, the first Gospel: Moses writes about Jesus as the one who will crush the head of the serpent in bringing salvation to the world (Gen 3:15).
2. In Genesis 12, in the call of Abraham: God is going to bless the family of Abraham so that all families on earth will be blessed. Jesus is that blessing to all families on earth (Gen 12:3).
3. In Genesis 49, in Jacob's blessing of Judah: Moses writes that the kingly Messiah will come from the line of Judah (Gen 49:10). Jesus, from the line of Judah is that kingly Messiah.
4. And, in Deuteronomy 18, a prophet like Moses: Moses tells the Israelites that God will raise up a prophet like him from among them. Moses instructs the Israelites to listen to him (Deut 18:15). Jesus is that prophet.

Moses wrote about Jesus, therefore, these leaders should be listening to Jesus, and honoring him like they honor God the Father.

And, with that, Jesus rests. He finishes his defense and his prosecution, bringing his first sermon in this Gospel to a close.

IV. Response

And, for us, it brings these three weeks to a close. This exalted text has given us much to consider and contemplate. And, today I'd like to close with this question. How do we respond after hearing the entire story?

And, I think there are three options this morning. We can respond like the Religious Authorities, like the lame man or in trust that Jesus is who he says he is. Let me explain each of these options.

1. **We can respond like the Religious Authorities.** They have God in a box, and when he acts unlike their expectations, they get angry. He broke a rule! Jesus didn't fit into their nice neat package. Jesus didn't fit into their religion. At the root, as we said, this is pride, and of course, we are all susceptible to it. We can put Jesus into a box, and demand that he work only according to our nice neat package. When this happens, we can be in danger of not hearing God's voice or seeing how he is working.

Practically speaking, this may be according to our own religious tradition or denomination. God can only work within our *perfect* understanding of revelation. We can identify the religious speck in another's eye from a great distance, but have no love for God in ourselves.

Or maybe it's our own scientific presuppositions. God can only work according to how we understand how the natural world works.

Or maybe it's even our own business principles. God can only work within this budget or within these human goals and plans.

We can so easily put God in a box, which blinds us to the different ways he can work, and the different quality of life he can give. Obviously, there is discernment here. But, the crowd in front of Jesus saw a man healed who had been lame for 38 years, and all they saw was a broken rule.

2. **Or, we can respond like the lame man.** When Jesus asked him if he wanted to get well, to be made whole, he did not answer yes or no. He pointed to all the reasons he was still sick. He was focused on his brokenness and helplessness. Jesus was offering wholeness and all he could think about is getting into the pool. Are we so blinded by our brokenness, we miss out on Jesus' question, "Do you want to get well?" We talked about this two weeks ago, but one more way this can happen is when we pray. We can pray and fixate so much on our brokenness, we can miss hearing from the Lord who really wants to make us well. We can miss his offer of life and wholeness.
3. **Or, we can respond in trust and participation,** essentially pronouncing a verdict of innocent to the charge of blasphemy. We can respond in trust, trusting that Jesus is who he says he is. And, that's precisely the point from this story, His Words. Because Jesus is who he is, as he just explained, he can make things happen. Jesus' words bring into being that which does not exist. His words will not return void; they *will* accomplish what he purposes (Isa 55:11). So, we can trust them and then participate with him in the work he and his father are doing. Paul calls us fellow workers and co-laborers as we participate in His work.

And, because his word makes things happen, we can have confidence that it will happen. So, when He says to love, we can, because he said it. When He says to forgive, we can, because he said it. When He says abide, we can, because he said it. When He says rejoice, we can, because he said it. We can be salt and light in this world because he said it!

And, ultimately, we will have life, abundant life now and forever, because he said it.

Amen.

Benediction

Now, receive this Benediction from the hand of Paul:

20 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Resources

Brown, Raymond, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Harvey, A E, *Jesus on Trial*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching the Gospel According to John* (Regent College Course)

Klink, Edward, *John* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)