



WHO DOES HE THINK HE IS?

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 5:19-30

Tenth Message

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In his book *A View From the Zoo*, Gary Richmond tells a hilarious but frightening story about collecting poisonous Black Widow spiders when he was a little boy. Gary, who is now pastor to single adults in the First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton in Southern California, was for 10 years a zoo-keeper in the Los Angeles Zoo. The greatest lesson he ever learned, he writes, was when he was eight years old and his neighborhood had an infestation of Black Widow spiders. Gary and a couple of his friends, one of whom was his 12-year-old brother, decided they would do their part in ridding the neighborhood of this menace, so they set about capturing ten of the poisonous beasts with a stick and jar. Everything went well during the capture of the first few spiders, but the job became more difficult as the jar began to fill up. In their attempt to capture number nine, the biggest spider they had ever seen, things got a little out of hand. As they were about to put the Black Widow in the jar, it jumped and landed between Gary's bare feet. He jumped backwards and in his excitement forgot to put the lid back on the jar. As he watched his brother attempt to recover the spider, he failed to notice a medium-sized Black Widow was crawling up the back of his hand. He writes,

I slowly became aware of an eerie sensation. I stared in disbelief at the little killer that was taking a morning stroll on my hand. I let the jar slip through my fingers and Black Widows began to run everywhere. They mattered little anymore; the game was over. . . My brother looked at me and it was clear that he was experiencing fear also. But I believe his fear was of a different nature. The fear that I was experiencing was that, for the first time in my life, I really believed I was going to die, not like in Cowboys and Indians where you get up again, but the sort of death where everything goes dark, and after that I wasn't sure what would happen. It took all my strength to keep from fainting. I could feel every footfall of the spider on the back of my hand. I stayed perfectly still. I begged my brother with tear-filled eyes to please get the spider off my hand. He moved his index finger in a flicking position to within an inch of the spider. I held my breath and wanted to close my eyes, but I knew if I did, it would be for the last time. The spider stopped as if to consider what threat the finger posed, and when she did, Steve flicked with all his might. The spider went flying. I have never felt a greater sense of relief in all my life. Neither have I before or since learned a more important truth: someday I'm going to die. How you feel about that truth has everything to do with how you prepare for it.

Many of us could relate events in our lives that forced us to deal with our own frailty. Facing death helps us understand how to live, doesn't it? Death shatters the myth of self-sufficiency. As we perhaps recall incidents from the past that helped us face our own finiteness we will understand all the more the importance of the words we will hear this morning from the lips of Jesus himself, words about life and death, found in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of John.

Last week we focused on the miraculous healing of the man at the Pool of Bethesda. Among the crowd gathered around the porches of the pool that day were many who witnessed the miracle with open-mouthed amazement, staggered by what they had seen. But a handful of men, whom John calls "the Jews" (he means the leaders of the Jews, some of the priests, the ruling class) were not impressed. With narrowed eyes they looked on this miraculous occurrence and whispered their displeasure among themselves, angered by what Jesus had done. Verse 18 says that they viewed Jesus as a renegade who refused to obey sabbath regulations, and, even worse, a blasphemer against God:

For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God. (18)

What an incredible response to what they had seen happen! They had just interviewed a weak, powerless invalid who had been sick for 38 years, and this man was now standing on his feet and walking, behaving in a normal fashion, having been made whole. And what was their reaction to all this? They were disgusted! They were angry at the One who had dared violate the regulations they had added to the Mosaic laws concerning the sabbath. Further, they regarded Jesus as a blasphemer because he dared to say things that made it sound as though he were equal with God. The rabbis used that term "to makes oneself equal with God" to refer to a rebel, one who claimed to be independent from God and had no need to submit to him.

In reply to this misunderstanding on the part of the Jews, Jesus now will go on to explain who he is. In verses 19 through 30, which we will look at this morning, he will speak of his relationship to his Father. I wish we could picture in our minds this magnificent scene as Jesus confronts these hostile priests and explains to them in simple terms how he operated. Even as he uttered these words, however, he knew that what he said would be twisted and distorted until at last they would be used against him to kill him.

Let us read what Jesus said on that occasion:

Jesus therefore answered and was saying to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless [it is] something He sees the Father doing; for whatever [the Father] does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and greater works than these will He show Him, that you may marvel."

Jesus begins by calling upon all present to pay attention to what he is about to say. Notice that he uses the words "Truly, truly, I say to you..." Whenever you come across this phrase in the gospels, pay close attention to what fol-

lows for this is Jesus' way to warn his hearers that what he is about to say is absolutely fundamental to what he wants to convey.

"The Son can do nothing of Himself." In these words Jesus reveals the secret to his life and ministry, the very source of his power. *"The Son can do nothing of Himself."* That is one of the most radical statements in all of Scripture. Why? It is because it is a revelation of the folly of self-sufficiency. Now Jesus was not saying that it was physically impossible for him to do things apart from the Father. Far from it. He could have created an entire universe, but he never chose to use that power for his own benefit. Never! This explains his behavior in the wilderness when he was tempted by the devil to use that power for his own means. How did he respond? He steadfastly refused. It was not that it was physically impossible for him to do so, but that it was morally impossible. To respond as the devil suggested would be an absolute contradiction of who he was: it would violate the Father's love. On the contrary, what Jesus was doing was looking at the heart of God the Father and, seeing what the Father wanted him to do in any given situation, he immediately obeyed. The Jews charged that because he refused to submit to God's regulations he was a rebel, but Jesus replied that it would be impossible for him to act independently of God. Why? It was because they had a Father-Son relationship. And it was not the kind of father-son relationship that we are familiar with. Theirs was a perfect relationship: one of perfect love on the part of the Father and perfect love on the part of the Son. Jesus, the divine Son, was so controlled by the love of the Father, that it was reflected in everything he said and did.

"The Son can do nothing of his own accord but only what He sees the Father doing." I want to share with you an amazing truth of life: that same secret is available to us today. The heart of what Jesus attempted to communicate to his disciples in the Upper Room on the night before he was crucified, was that we could have the same relationship to him as the Son as he had to the Father. What the Father would do through him, the Son is prepared to do through us. He told the disciples in John 15 that it was to their advantage that he was going away: *"Apart from me you can do nothing."* (5.) *"Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love."* (9.) *"No longer do I call you slaves; for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you."* (15.) The relationship between Jesus and his Father is now duplicated between Christians and the Son. This is the secret of the release of the power of God: nothing coming from us, but everything coming from God. This was the secret of the apostle Paul's ministry. Remember his words in 2 Corinthians 3: *"This is the confidence we have through Christ, not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God."* It was on that basis that the apostle did the mighty work that changed the history of the world.

And Jesus lived like this all the time. It was not merely in raising people from sick beds that he employed the power of God. He lived this way every moment of the day. This was what he was doing when he spoke to the lonely and the heartsick and brought them life and faith. It was this same power that made his words full of impact and meaning to the woman at the well. His submission to the Father made Jesus the release point for the expression of the power

of God in any circumstance, and that same power is available to us when we at last recognize the folly of self-sufficiency.

In these verses therefore Jesus is claiming complete unity with God his Father. Never in the history of the world has anyone spoken like this.

Jesus goes on say more about this relationship. He shares two things: the life of the Father, and the judgment of the Father. Verses 21-23:

"For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes. For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him."

It is probably impossible for us to understand how these words sounded to his hearers on that day. These are radical, amazing claims. When we read them we are forced to conclude that Jesus was either suffering from delusions of grandeur, or that he was a liar, trying to pass himself off as something he wasn't, or that he was, as he claimed to be, the Lord of life itself.

Jesus claims that all life belongs to him; he only lends it to us for awhile. Think about that. That is not what we are told in the media, is it? We are led to believe that our life is ours and we can do anything we want with it. But that is a lie. We didn't invent life. Life was handed to us, and one of these days we are going to have to give it back.

In the first chapter of his gospel, John declared that it was through Jesus that all physical creation came into being. All physical life came into being through him, and all spiritual life will come into being through him as well. The prologue of this gospel actually is reminiscent of the Book of Genesis: *"In the beginning."* The fundamental message of Genesis 1 is that God's word has the dynamic power to bring life and order out of chaos in the physical realm. And the message of the Gospel of John is that in the same way, God's Word, Jesus Christ, has the dynamic power to bring life and order out of the emptiness and chaos of the spiritual realm.

So Jesus is the One through whom life comes out of emptiness. He is the sole source of life.

And it is not only that he has life, he is life—*aionios* life, eternal life, the life of the age to come! And he came in order to give it away. Life comes from being related to Jesus, the Life-giver. There is no other person we can go to, no other relationship we can initiate, no support group we can join, no job we can find, no degree we can earn, that will give us life. In both the physical realm and the realm of our spiritual lives, Jesus is the only Author of life. We can state this quite simply: there is nowhere else and nobody else we can go to to find true life.

Now when the Bible speaks of eternal life, it is not merely referring to quantity of life (or "everlasting life," as the KJV translates it). It is not speaking of a quantity of days added on to the end of our stay here on earth. Rather, what it is describing is a quality of life. While it is true that this life goes on forever, the Bible focuses primarily on the richness of that life. It is the life of the age to come. It is life in all its fullness and beauty. Eternal life is a quality of relationship. We were designed to live in relationship with Someone who is unfailingly strong and lovingly involved, Someone

who will enable us to handle the important tasks he gives us. Without this kind of relationship and impact life is profoundly empty. No circle of imperfect friends or impressive work or excitement or pleasure will reward us with this kind of experience. Of course, you can pretend that you are living this kind of life. You can pretend that life is absolutely fulfilling and that your relationships are wildly successful. But sometime, somehow, reality will come crashing in on you. It is then that you will discover how profoundly empty life without Christ really is.

Because Jesus gives this life to whomever he wishes, this makes him the arbiter of the destiny of every human being. He is the Judge of all men. And it is his knowledge of who is to receive eternal life and who is to remain without it that makes him the infallible Judge of human destiny. If Jesus gives you life, then you are on your way to heaven. You will never taste the terrible loneliness and emptiness of death. But if he doesn't give you life, then you will remain exactly the way you were—on your way to hell, to frustration, to life without God, to life without richness, meaning and beauty.

If this claim is true—if our very physical existence comes from him and our spiritual destiny is in his hands—then Jesus is the most important Person we will ever have to deal with. He is the central figure in all the universe. This is how the Bible views him. And if you read the book of Revelation, you will see how the world will ultimately view him.

Because this is true, no Christian can ever put Jesus Christ on a par with Mohammed, Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi, the virgin Mary, Moses, the prophets, or any other religious leader of any time. This is why we can't describe as a Christian someone who merely accepts the teachings of Jesus or adopts his moral standards. Jesus himself does not allow for that privilege. If you do not honor Jesus Christ on the same level that you honor the Father, then you do not really honor the Father. The relationship you have to Jesus Christ determines your ultimate destiny.

A woman and her fiance came to me for counsel last week. When I inquired about her spiritual background, she said to me, "I honor God in my own way. I don't like organized religion." She had been turned off by narrow-minded Christians, she said. Maybe some of you here this morning feel that way, too. But the question is, What are you going to do with Jesus Christ? You can't honor him in your own vague way. Sometimes we presume to treat God in a way we wouldn't dare treat a person—a boss, for instance. We wouldn't dare take the attitude, "I hate organized corporate structures, therefore I will honor my boss in my way." Try that and you may not have a job next week! We wouldn't do that to a man, but we dare to say, "I'll honor God in *my* way" Hadn't we better honor him the way he has prescribed?

And we discover that way in verse 24. There Jesus sets out the terms on which this life is offered. Every Christian should memorize this wonderful, powerful statement:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life."

To whom does Jesus Christ give eternal life? To the man or woman, boy or girl who hears his words and believes in him who sent him; to the one who is willing to listen to his

claims, to believe his credentials, and act on that basis and follow him as his obedient disciple. When that happens, one *has* eternal life. It is not that he will have it someday when he dies; he has it right then. At that point all judgment is passed, and he passes from death to life.

All of us are headed for death. We don't like to talk about it; we put it out of our thoughts as long as we can. We are all headed for death. But Jesus reminds us that death is no longer the critical issue; relationship to the Life-giver is.

He expands on this in verses 25 and 26:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead [the spiritually dead] shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear shall live. For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself;

In the words "an hour is coming," Jesus is referring to the day of Pentecost, when a new thing would happen. Then the Spirit of God would come in a new and fresh way and give this gift of eternal life to Jews and Gentiles alike from all over the world. That hour of which Jesus spoke is now more than 1900 years long; and during that time everyone who heard his word and believed has received eternal life.

But Jesus also says, "*and now is,*" meaning, it was already happening even as he was speaking. We have seen this before in John's gospel. Nicodemus, the troubled religious leader, came to Jesus by night, trying to find peace in his spirit. Jesus said to him, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life." It appears that Nicodemus did believe and that he did receive that gift of life. Remember the Samaritan woman at the well. She was living an empty life, looking for love in all the wrong places, trying to find a man who would meet her needs and longings. After five tries she had given up on marriage and was living with a man who was not her husband. What did Jesus say to this woman who was so thirsty? Here are his remarkable words: "whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life." The Samaritan woman received that life on that day, and she was so excited by what had happened to her spirit that she ran and brought the whole town out to hear this One who could give the gift of eternal life. So it is already happening. "The hour is coming, and now is, when the spiritually dead will hear the Son of God and those who hear will live." Jesus Christ always has been and always will be the Life-giver.

He who has the Son has eternal life. Do you have it? Are you merely breathing today or are you truly alive?

Jesus goes on to say that this giving of life and this executing of judgment is not only a present-day activity, but a future one as well. Then he will not only give life to those who are spiritually dead, but also to those who are physically dead. Verses 27-30:

"...and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is [the] Son of Man. Do not marvel at this [What does this say about their demeanor as Jesus was speaking? Their mouths were hanging open. They were astonished that he was making these claims.]; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good [deeds] to a resurrection of life, those who committed

the evil [deeds] to a resurrection of judgment. I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me."

The voice of the Son of God is powerful enough to generate spiritual life now; and it will be powerful enough to call forth the dead then. An hour is coming in history when all will be resurrected. The cemeteries will be emptied. Then, even the bodies of men and women will share in their final destiny. Those who have done "good" (which in the context of this passage refers to those who have believed and received eternal life) will experience the resurrection of life. Only those in whom the life of God dwells can "do good" in God's eyes. Those who have done evil are those who have refused his life, those who have turned their backs on truth and shut their ears to the offer of the grace of God, and they will be resurrected to judgment.

C.S. Lewis has a sobering word concerning that day:

God is going to invade this world by force. But what is the good of saying you are on his side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream, and something else—something it never entered your heads to conceive—comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us, and so terrible to others, that none of us will have any choice left? For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying that you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we have really chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back, to give us that chance. It will not last forever. We must take it or leave it.

This is the force of these words of Jesus. No wonder they challenged and frightened the people of his day. They challenge and frighten us in 1992. But Jesus reminds us there will be no argument against his judgment. No one will be able to complain that it is unfair because it is the work of the Father and the Son.

Are there people listening to me this morning who have never received eternal life? You have never known life. You have spent years trying to protect yourself from the pain of life, relying on your own sufficiency, but you have failed miserably. You have never known true life. To you, God today is offering through his Son the same relationship that Jesus is referring to here.

At the end of *The Last Battle*, the final book in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, Aslan talks to Peter, Edmund and Lucy, telling them that they are dead as the result of a railway accident:

And as He [Aslan] spoke, He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen to them after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and title page. Now at last they were beginning chapter 1 of the Great Story which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.

This promise is true for all who believe: Christ's authority will call us forth to a new life for which life on earth has been but the "cover and the title page."

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