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John 5:31-47

Eleventh Message

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## RELIGIOUS YET LOST

*SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE*

Last week, my ophthalmologist and I discussed the eye surgery that I will eventually need to prevent me from getting glaucoma. Later, as I was driving back to my office, I found myself appreciating the gift of sight in new ways. I pondered what it would be like to be blind.

I read a story a few years ago about a man who had been blind for 51 years. During five decades of darkness he had felt his way through life. Then one day, everything changed. A skilled surgeon performed a complicated operation and, for the first time, at the age of 51, Bob Edens could see. It is hard for us to imagine the impact this made upon him. As you might expect, he found the whole thing overwhelming. Listen to his own account of seeing colors for the first time:

I would never have dreamed that yellow is so . . . yellow. I don't have the words. I am amazed by yellow. But red is my favorite color. I just can't believe red. I can see the shape of the moon. And I like nothing better than seeing a jet plane flying across the sky, leaving a vapor trail. And, of course, sunrises and sunsets. And at night I look at the stars in the sky . . . you could never know how wonderful everything is.

He is right. We who have lived all our lives taking for granted the gift of sight can't possibly imagine how wonderful it must be to be able to see for the first time in 51 years.

But Bob Edens isn't the only one who spent a lifetime surrounded by things he could not see. Everyone suffers from some form of blindness. Isn't it amazing that we can live for years next to something, but unless we take time to focus on it, it doesn't become a part of our life? Just because we have witnessed a thousand rainbows doesn't mean we have truly seen the grandeur of a rainbow. We can pass by a garden every day of our lives and yet never really see the splendor of a flower. And a man or woman can, from their perspective, be all that goodness calls them to be and still never see the Author of life. Being honest or moral or even religious doesn't necessarily mean we will see God. This is what we will discover today in the passage to which we come in our studies in the gospel of John.

Have you really seen Jesus? During these past weeks, as we have studied his encounters with various individuals, perhaps a word that was said found a receptive place in your heart. Maybe something you heard touched your grieving spirit and you caught a glimpse of Jesus, the One who spoke with such authority and loved with such humility; the One who claimed to be older than time and greater than death. People who have truly seen him for who he is find they are never the same again. Have you seen him? You may have seen what others have seen, or heard what others have said about him, but until you see him for your-

self, you've only caught visions of a hazy gray; you have never known yellow. One man put it this way: "Christianity, in its purest form, is nothing more than seeing Jesus. . ." This is what God wants for us: to see Jesus as he really is.

John 5:19-30, the verses we looked at last week, is one of the most exalted passages in this gospel. There, Jesus made certain claims—claims that no rational man has ever made before or since. He claimed to be deity clothed in mortal flesh. He claimed to be the "Son of God," "the source of all life," "the judge of the world" (all history is headed toward a confrontation with him), and the "raiser of the dead," the one who is going to empty all the cemeteries of the earth.

Those who heard him were amazed by his words. Yet he told them, "Don't marvel at what I say." Many, however, must have wondered, "How do we know that you are telling the truth? What evidence can you present to verify your claims?" One would expect that the Jews would raise an objection here. And they did, in 8:13: "You are your own witness, and your witness cannot be true," they charged. They wanted corroborative testimony. It was Moses who said: "out of the mouths of two or three witnesses let every word be established." Because everybody could not be trusted, the law prescribed that there must be witnesses.

In our passage this morning, Jesus will meet this legal obligation. He recognizes the prescriptions of the law, and he presents his listeners with three witnesses that corroborate his claims.

Let us examine these witnesses as he introduces them in our text. John 5:31:

**"If I [alone] bear witness of Myself, My testimony is not true. There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the testimony which He bears of Me is true.**

Jesus immediately informs his hearers that all three witnesses that he will present are merely different aspects of the "witness of another," namely, that of the Father on his behalf. Our Lord has already said, in the strongest terms, that everything he says and does is nothing more than a reflection of his perfect obedience to his Father. He says only what the Father wants him to say, and does only what the Father wants him to do. His witness, therefore, is not his own; it is the witness of his Father. That is why Jesus can be so bold and assertive in his claims, and why he knows that he is not merely testifying about himself.

But Jesus also knew that his hearers needed corroborative testimony.

Perhaps we will get a feeling for what he is trying to convey in this passage if we can illustrate. Imagine that a messenger came to you and told you that your boss had just

promoted you to Vice-President of the firm you work for. Though it is good news, it is meaningless unless the messenger has really come from the boss. If you make a call to work and discover that no one has ever heard of this messenger, then you can dismiss his message as, perhaps, at best, a practical joke. If the messenger really was sent by the boss, however, then you know that this offer was genuine.

In the same way, Jesus declares, the Father sent other messengers and they all said the same thing about who he was and why he came. Jesus identifies three of them in these verses. The Father has not only sent the Son, through whom he may be known, he has provided many other witnesses that will declare that God has indeed spoken through Christ. This will remove all excuses people have for neglecting to put their trust in him.

Let's examine these witnesses of whom Jesus speaks.

### I. The Witness of John the Baptist 5:33-35

**"You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. But the witness which I receive is not from man, but I say these things that you may be saved. He was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.**

John the Baptist is the first witness Jesus calls to the stand. John was one who reflected the Father's witness, since he was a man "sent by God"—a fact that the rulers would admit. Remember that the Jews sent an accredited delegation to report on John's message. Now Jesus reminds them, "You have sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth." Since those listening to Jesus recognized John as unquestionably truthful and accurate, the logic of the situation demanded that they should believe his witness concerning Jesus.

And what was John's analysis of Jesus? He announced him to be the long-expected Messiah, the One of whom the prophets wrote. John even quoted the words of Isaiah concerning his own role, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" Jesus was that Lord! John declared him to be "the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world," meaning, Jesus was the innocent substitute who would stand in our place and take our sins upon himself and free us to experience the love of God and all its blessings. John declared Jesus to be the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. He would pour out rivers of living water that would satisfy the thirst of our hearts for life and truth. John declared Jesus to be "the Son of God." He was the Word made flesh, God himself, Lord of heaven and earth, become man.

Jesus tells the Jews that although he doesn't need the testimony of John to establish who he is, he knows it may be a saving help to those who heard that testimony. Our Lord recognizes the value of a witness. It is a strange phenomenon, that men and women who pay no attention to the voice of God, who will never open God's Word to see what God has said directly, will often listen with great interest to someone who tells them what his experience with God has been. The Bible is the best-selling book of all time. It is God's testimony to mankind. Yet people fail to read it and study it, although they will listen with fascination when someone shares his testimony about his life. This is what Jesus is talking about here—the value of a witness.

He goes on to say a very beautiful thing about John: "He was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light." John was a lamp. He wasn't the light. He was a lamp, a light-bearer. There is a lamp hanging here in the auditorium that is not burning and therefore is not shining. There is a lamp, but there is no light. Many people are like that. They are lamps, but they are not shining. But John was a lamp that shone brightly. He told people where they could see and hear and how they could know the Light. He clearly pointed out Jesus.

Would you like to be a shining lamp? Do you know how to do it? Burn! Let the truth of God fuel your heart until it begins to burn. Christians are all intended to be prophets. Peter declared as much on the day of Pentecost when he explained the prophecy of Joel. "In the last days," said the prophet, "the Holy Spirit will be poured out and everyone will prophesy." That is the age in which we now live, and this is the privileged position of every believer without distinction. This, too, was the ministry of John the Baptist, whom Jesus presents here as his first witness.

There is a second way that the Father has borne witness to who Jesus is.

### II. The Witness of Jesus' Miracles 5:36

**"But the witness which I have is greater than [that of] John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me.**

Here, the miracles of Jesus are introduced as testimony. These too represent the witness of the Father, for they were given to the Son by the Father. Even Nicodemus recognized that. He said to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God . . . for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." Remember, Jesus had just healed a man who had been paralyzed for 37 years. The Jews saw him rise up from his pallet and walk. He was probably standing right there as Jesus was speaking, so they could not miss him.

Now these miracles were not only acts of power, they were acts of power that were saying something about who Jesus was; they were material witnesses to underlying spiritual truth. Many of us can visualize ourselves, paralyzed, unable to do the things we know we should, lame, unable to walk well spiritually. And yet in our impotence Jesus finds us and heals us. We learn that he is the one who can "restore the years that the locust has eaten." He can give new strength to hearts and lives.

What were the miracles of Jesus saying about who he was? In the miracle of the changing of the water into wine, his disciples began to see that he was the one who could turn the water of ritualism and legalism into the wine of the liberty of the gospel. In the healing of the nobleman's son, we see that he is the one who can heal when doctors can't. He can calm a troubled spirit and instill faith. The feeding of the five thousand, which we will look at next time, is a picture of what he can do in the hearts of hungry men and women. These signs give us insight into the heart of God and what he longs to do in our lives. They are God's testimony to the person of Jesus; the testimony of God dramatized through the works of Jesus.

But the Jewish leaders' tragic failure to grasp God's truth becomes even more evident in their approach to the third

witness called by Jesus, the Scriptures, what we would call the Old Testament.

### III. The Witness of the Scriptures 5:37-47

**"And the Father who sent Me, He has borne witness of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. And you do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent. You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life. I do not receive glory from men; but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves. I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another shall come in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another, and you do not seek the glory that is from the [one and] only God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?"**

To appreciate the power of this indictment we need to understand the reverence these men had for the Scriptures.

The Pharisees held the Scriptures in such esteem that they thought the very parchments and words contained eternal life. Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet had been given a numerical equivalent. Each word had its numerical equivalent. Each line formed a mathematical equation. The scribes even numbered the center of each line in Scripture, the center letter of each book, and the center letter in the Old Testament.

In copying the Scriptures, a scribe was not allowed to write more than one letter before looking back to the text. One of the great Rabbis, Hillel, wrote this in a list of maxims:

*More flesh, more worms;  
More wealth, more care;  
More maidservants, more lewdness;  
More menservants, more thieving;  
More women, more witchcraft;  
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.*

Though they always had their noses in the Scriptures, the biblical scholars of Jesus' day never got beyond the parchment and ink. As an entity, they rejected Jesus when he came to them.

Jesus does not have a favorable opinion of their openness to God's revelation. Listen to his threefold indictment of them.

*"You have never heard his voice."* They were not like Moses, who had heard God's voice. Since Jesus speaks the words of God and the Jews do not hear God's voice in him, it follows that they are not followers of Moses. In fact, Jesus says that Moses will turn out to be their accuser. The very one whom they are using as their excuse to persecute Jesus, will instead become their accuser. Secondly, *"You have never seen his form."* They were not like Jacob, who saw God's form. Since Jesus is the very manifestation of God, and the Jews

do not see God in him, it follows that they are not true Israelites. Thirdly, *"You do not have His word abiding in you."* They were not like Joshua, or the Psalmists, who hid God's word in their hearts, meditating on it. These men understood that that divine blessing was vitally dependent on the indwelling of this word. Since Jesus was the very word of God (become flesh), and the Jews had no time for him, it followed that they shared neither in the experience nor in the blessings of the Psalmists.

The import of this ringing indictment is that the opponents of Jesus had not grasped the significance of all previous revelation. The writer to the Hebrews said, "God has spoken at many times and in various ways"—but all of these were anticipatory of the supreme revelation. Failure to believe in Jesus was, therefore, compelling evidence that, however exacting their scholarship in studying that revelation, it had not been absorbed or understood or obeyed.

Jesus is the main subject of the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Scriptures. He is on every page. He is there in type and in shadow, in sacrifice and priesthood. The entire Old Testament is preparation for the one who called himself the true vine.

If I said to you this morning that I had been reading through the Old Testament and I found that the whole book was talking about me, what would you do? You would probably be very polite to me and then, when the service ended, you would take me to El Camino Hospital and put me on a 48-hour hold for a mental evaluation. We would do that for anyone who made that claim. Mohammed never made that claim. Buddha never made it. But when Jesus makes it, we don't call him insane. Why is that, do you think? It is because there is acknowledgment of the justice of his claim. One commentator writes: "We see from this passage how Jesus beheld himself in the mirror of the OT. There, he recognized His own figure so clearly that He thought it impossible to study the book sincerely and *not come to him immediately.*" Rightly understood, the OT points forward to Jesus. Incorrectly understood, it leads to legalism and death. The function of the OT law is to lead you to Christ. It is there to make you realize that you can't live up to it. You have to come from law to grace.

*"You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me..."*

Imagine you are on the top floor of the Transamerica building in San Francisco at sunset. You are enjoying the beauty of the sunset, the view of the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges, and then someone tugs on your shirt-sleeve and says, "Isn't this a wonderful window? Do you see how it is set in steel, the beautiful tinted glass?" Then he takes out his pocket knife and scrapes away at a corner of the glass and says, "I'm going to do a chemical analysis of this window. If you give me your address, I'll send you the results." Wouldn't you think he was acting strangely? Wouldn't you wonder how on earth he had missed the purpose of the window, which was to provide a view of the city and the gorgeous sunset?

In the same way, the Bible was given to enable us to see Christ in all his glory. It was given to lead us to him. But Jesus recognized that it is possible to study the Bible, to even give our whole life to it, and never see him. Does this describe you? You come here week after week and you spend your time gazing at the window, examining it and perhaps even commenting favorably on it, but you have never

looked through it to gaze upon Jesus.

The Jewish leaders believed what many still believe today: that knowledge is power, that education is life. Someone described this phenomenon in these words,

Trained men's minds are spread so thin,  
They let all sorts of darkness in.  
Whatever light man finds they doubt it,  
They love not light, but talk about it.

How is that possible? What is the problem? It's not just a Jewish problem. We can't sit here this morning and shake our heads, wondering how the Jews can reject the Messiah who is so clearly identified in the Old Testament. We fail to see that we Gentiles do the same thing. We give mental assent to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, yet we still don't come to him.

We still believe that knowledge is power, that education is life. That is what we need to solve the AIDS crisis, isn't it? That is what we need to solve the problem of teenage pregnancy. That is what we need to solve the problem of racial prejudice. That is what you need to help you with your problems, isn't it? You just need more truth. Another self-help book. Another seminar. Another sermon. Another five principles that will make your life perfect. Knowledge is power. Do you still believe that?

That philosophy has one fatal shortcoming: our flawed humanity.

Here is how Jesus articulates our problem: "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another, and you do not seek the glory that is from the [one and] only God?" Pride is the reason for our stubborn unbelief. Ambition is our own worst enemy. We want glory now, not in heaven someday. We love the praise of men so much that we are unwilling to set it aside to receive the glory of God. We want to look good. That is the bottom line. How can we follow Jesus when we are out to please ourselves, when we are in love with the philosophy of the world that is flung at us all day to look out for ourselves and stand up for ourselves? That philosophy is a denial of the truth that we have a Fa-

ther who loves us and is ready to work on our behalf if we will allow him.

But there can only be one in control. We cannot love the world and love the Father. We can't have it both ways. We have to admit what is really going on inside of us. We have to admit need. Remember Jesus' words to the church at Laodicea: "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see."

It was to that church that he said, "*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.*" Few hear his voice. Fewer still open the door. But we must never blame our numbness on his absence. There is no chorus so loud that the voice of God cannot be heard . . . if we will but listen.

Jesus told us earlier in this gospel that "a day is coming when everyone will hear [his] voice." A day is coming when all the other voices will be silenced. Then his voice, and his voice only, will be heard. Some will hear it then for the very first time. It's not that he never spoke before; it's just that they never listened. For them it will be the voice of a stranger. But they will hear it once. Then they will spend eternity fending off the voices they followed on earth.

God wants us to see yellow. He wants to put salve on our eyes so we can see. Sometimes, as many of us have discovered, he will take drastic measures to help us recognize how blind we really are. Are you ready to admit your blindness today? If you are, God is ready to heal you.

Life is not to be found in a self-help book or in a silicon chip. True life is found in a relationship with the only One who can give life.

My prayer for you today is that the Divine Surgeon will use this Book as a delicate surgical tool to grant you sight; that God in his own unique way will reveal to you your blindness and give you a glimpse of the majesty of his Son; that your blurred eyes will be able to focus, and the darkness will be dispersed; that Christ will emerge from a wavy figure in a desert mirage to become the touchable face of an intimate friend.

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