



IS CHRISTIANITY CREDIBLE?

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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John 7:1-24

Fifteenth Message

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I enjoy snuggling up to my ten-year-old son, Steve, at his bedtime. We have had some interesting conversations during those last few minutes before he closes his eyes. He has figured out that he can delay things by becoming philosophical with his Dad at bedtime. One night recently, he asked, "Dad, how do we know that all the things we believe in are really true?" I assured him that having doubts is not unusual. We all have doubts about our faith on occasion. We wonder whether Christianity is credible, whether Jesus is "for real," as the expression goes.

The following piece, written some years ago, encouraged me greatly in my early Christian life:

More than nineteen hundred years ago there was a man born contrary to the laws of nature. This man lived in poverty and was reared in obscurity. He did not travel extensively. Only once did he cross the boundary of the country in which he lived; that was during His exile in childhood. He possessed neither wealth nor influence. His relatives were inconspicuous, and had neither training nor formal education. In infancy He startled a king; in childhood He puzzled doctors; in manhood He ruled the course of nature, walked upon the billows as if pavements, and hushed the sea to sleep. He healed the multitudes without medicine and made no charge for his service. He never wrote a book, and yet all the libraries of the country could not hold the books that have been written about Him. He never wrote a song, and yet he has furnished the theme for more songs than all the songwriters combined. He never founded a college, but all the schools put together cannot boast of having so many students. He never marshaled an army, nor drafted a soldier, nor fired a gun; and yet no leader ever had more volunteers who have, under His orders, made more rebels stack arms and surrender without a shot fired. He never practiced psychiatry, and yet he has healed more broken hearts than all the doctors far and near.

Once each week the wheels of commerce cease their turning and multitudes wend their way to worshipping assemblies to pay homage and respect to Him. The names of the past proud statesman of Greece and Rome have come and gone. The names of the past scientists, philosophers, and theologians have come and gone; but the name of this man abounds more and more. Though time has spread almost 2000 years between the people of this generation and the scene of his crucifixion, yet He still lives! Herod could not destroy Him, and the grave could not hold Him. He stands forth upon the highest pinnacle of heavenly glory, proclaimed of God, acknowledged by angels, adored by saints, and feared by devils, as the living, personal Christ, our Lord and Savior! The greatest wonder of all, perhaps, is that while he was alive on the earth, his own family did not believe him and his own nation opposed him to the death.

We return to our studies in the gospel of John, taking up our text this morning in chapter 7. Belief and unbelief are an important theme in this gospel. As you will remember,

John's purpose in writing this book is found in verses 30 and 31 of chapter 20, in his words, "that you may believe Jesus is the Christ":

Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written *that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.*

Notice again the marker, if you will, that we have already come across in this gospel to alert us to a new unit of thought. It is the phrase, "After these things . . ." These words introduce the longest single section of the book, from 7:1 through 11:53, a passage that deals with the hatred and animosity of the Jewish leaders toward Jesus and their persistent unbelief in him. The aim of chapter 7 is quite clear. It is to show that there are only two ways of thinking about Jesus: you either believe him or you do not believe him. You cannot be neutral in the face of his claims.

John's opening words set the stage for the drama that is to follow:

And 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 at hand. His brothers therefore said to Him, "Depart from here, and go into Judea, that Your disciples also may behold 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. Jesus therefore said to them, "My time is not yet at hand, 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." And having said these things to them, He stayed in Galilee.

The events of chapter 7 take place about six months after the feeding of the 5000. (The other gospels record Jesus' ministry during these months in Galilee.) The Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths), one of the three great festivals held in Jerusalem, regarded by the Jews as the holiest feast of all, was at hand. This celebration was so important that they often referred to it (not to Passover) as *the* feast. The Feast of Tabernacles commemorated God's care for Israel during the days in the wilderness (Leviticus 23:33-43, Deuteronomy 16:13-15). For this reason, pilgrims and residents of Jerusalem lived in tents (huts, booths, or tabernacles) made of branches, for the week. Everyone camped out with their families as a reminder of the days when God dwelt in their midst and "camped out" with them. The feast was a joyous occasion — a family camp and family reunion all in one.

Jesus' four brothers planned to go to the feast, and they invited him to go with them. They took on the role of a self-appointed political action committee and gave him what they felt was much-needed advice. They told him what every political candidate in our upcoming election is being told. First, they say, he needs a bigger arena. Galilee is too small for him. Why should he remain there in the sticks? He needed to get down to Jerusalem. They also infer that Jesus' game-plan is faulty. "No one does anything in secret," they suggest, "when he himself seeks to be {known} publicly." Their basic premise is, it pays to advertise. If he wanted to be known in the religious world, Jerusalem was where he would have to make his mark. It is one thing to impress the humble folk of Galilee, but quite another to impress the clergy in Jerusalem. The upcoming feast would be the right time to do this. Everyone who was anyone would be there. What a perfect time to make himself known!

Jesus' brothers, James, Jude, Joses, and Simon, are mentioned elsewhere in the gospels. (Two of them would later write New Testament books.) After the resurrection, all four of them would come to believe in him, but here, John emphatically says that his brothers did not believe in him yet.

If they were asked whether Jesus was a good man, they would have sung his praises. They would have spoken highly of his compassion, his mercy and kindness. Although they could not quite understand him, I am sure they regarded him as a very good brother. But if they were asked the question, "Was he the promised Messiah?" they would have responded, "No." It was impossible for them to believe that the man they grew up with, the man the ate with and slept with, was the one whom the Scriptures talked about. This is why they argue the way they do. Their advice, which sounds logical and helpful, is rooted in their unbelief. Though they may have been amazed by Jesus' miracles, they did not accept his claims to be the Messiah.

Their advice to Jesus reminds me of how we frequently go about trying to do our Lord's work for him. We do this because we really don't believe he knows what he is doing. We don't think he knows how the church ought to function, so we help him out by adopting some of the world's methods of operating. We organize, and enlist, and raise funds, and we accompany our efforts with huge publicity campaigns. We enlist Christian superstars (TV personalities and athletes) to give us real influence (or so we think) with our non-Christian friends. Now there may not be anything wrong with any of those methods in themselves, but we must remember that we cannot do the work of God. Only God can do his work. Jesus said, "this is the work of God, that you believe in me." God has already revealed in the Scriptures how the church is to function. Our true influence is to be found in a correct understanding of the spiritual resources that are available to us through the presence of Christ in us. We need to learn how to employ that power so that we can live godly lives in our world and give ourselves away for the sake of others. That is what will cause the world to sit up and take notice.

So Jesus declines his brothers' invitation, just as he resisted Satan's deceptive offers in the wilderness. In his reply, he sets out the difference between his brothers and him. He explains that "his time had not yet come." His time was the cross, of course. They thought that his glory was revealed in his miracles — in his healings, his feeding the multitude, and other displays of power. But Jesus knew that his real time of glorification lay ahead — on the day when he

would offer his life for the world. When he said to them, "your time is always opportune," he meant that they could come and go as they wished. Their going to the feast was simply fulfilling what everyone expected of them. They could act without fear of arousing antagonism or opposition. The world could not hate them because they were living according to the way the world thought. They were not challenging the status quo. They went about their business, never irritating anyone. But, says Jesus, he was not free like they were. When he spoke, he exposed the hearts of men. He was called to speak the truth, to challenge the world, to tell people that their plans and values and religion were all wrong. He spoke out against evil, calling it for what it is, and that made people to wince. He wasn't free to go to Jerusalem, because they hated him there.

This is surely why our world loves euphemisms — polite ways of describing ugly things. We change the label on the bottle of poison and we imagine that we have changed the power of the poison. It's nicer to say we "terminated a pregnancy" than saying we committed murder. It sounds more acceptable to say "alternative lifestyle" than immoral behavior. The truth hurts! But Jesus didn't play those games. He came to tell men and women the truth, and in doing so he aroused the antagonism of hearts that wanted to cover up evil.

So he sends the brothers on their way while he remains in Galilee. But some time later he makes his way to Jerusalem in secret. He stays out of sight, but word spreads that he is in town, and the clergy are out to kill him. Verse 10:

But when His brothers had gone up to the feast, then He Himself also went up, not publicly, but as it were, in secret. The Jews therefore were seeking Him at the feast, and were saying, "Where is He?" And there was much grumbling among the multitudes concerning Him; some were saying, "He is a good man"; others were saying, "No, on the contrary, He leads the multitude astray." Yet no one was speaking openly of Him for fear of the Jews.

News of Jesus' miracles preceded him. In the intervening months since he had been in Jerusalem he had become the talk of the nation. The town was abuzz with excitement. But the people were polarized. Some said, "He is a good man. He does such wonderful things — restoring the deaf and making the lame walk. He explains life to us." But others said, "That's not the whole story. Have you heard what the leaders are saying? He teaches men to break the Law of Moses by violating the Sabbath. How can you say he is a good man? The Scriptures say that if a man doesn't follow what the Law says, don't believe him. Nobody who is good deceives the people." Yet, no one talked openly. There was a great deal of private conversation, but no public discussion. It was because they were afraid of the officials; the secret police were everywhere.

In the middle of the week, Jesus goes into the temple area to teach.

But when it was now the midst of the feast Jesus went up into the temple, and {began to} teach.

He probably spoke in the area called Solomon's Porch, the last remnant of Solomon's Temple, the only part not completely demolished by the Babylonians. It was a favorite place to gather for teaching.

The Jews therefore were marveling, saying, "How has this man become learned, having never been educated?" Jesus therefore answered them, and said, "My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If any man is willing to do His will, he shall 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.

What a marvelous teacher Jesus was! We don't know the content of this teaching, but whatever it was, the people were impressed. Even his enemies marveled at it. It was because his teaching had about it the quality that J.B. Phillips calls "the ring of truth," that deep conviction that what he said was reality, the way things really are. Jesus had a profound understanding of the Scriptures. The crowds marveled at his wisdom, yes, but they wondered about his credentials. "What rabbi did he study with?" they asked.

In those days, a rabbi learned by studying with another rabbi. And their studies consisted mainly of memorizing traditional interpretations of the Bible and the Talmud. A theological education consisted of learning what every well known rabbi thought about every tenet of the Law. Rabbis would work their way through all these intervening authorities, back to the ultimate authority. But Jesus didn't do that. He bypassed all the intervening authorities, and traced his authority directly to God. The leaders considered him an independent rebel as a result. But Jesus challenges that thinking. He wasn't a self-taught rabbi. On the contrary, he says, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from Him who sent me." He did learn from another, but his learning didn't come from any contemporary rabbi. He got it from God, his Father.

The words of Jesus remind me of the Servant Songs in Isaiah, which so beautifully prophesy of the Messiah. Isaiah writes in chapter 50: "*The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens me morning by morning. He awakens my ear to listen as a disciple.*" That is the source of teaching that understands life. It explains why the words of Jesus have such power. Ray Stedman once shared with us a letter from a close friend. Writing about preachers, this man said, "I want to hear from a man who knows God and has seen him recently. I don't want to listen to his press agent." People want to hear from someone who has been taught of God. This was certainly true of the Lord Jesus. His words had power because, morning by morning, he listened to his Father — and he shared only what the Father taught him.

In verse 17, Jesus gives his hearers a way to test his authority. Here, in what I feel is the heart of this passage, he makes one of the most remarkable claims of his entire teaching ministry:

"If any man is willing to do His will [that is, God's will], he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or {whether} I speak from Myself.

Do you want to know if Jesus is for real? Do you wonder at times if he really is who he claimed to be? Here he tells these rabbis that that question could not be decided by a rigorous debate in a rabbinical school. In fact, it is not merely an intellectual decision; there is a moral dimension involved. A resolution to do God's will brings with it the certainty of being right! That is different from the way we

naturally think. We want to know first, then we will act. But Jesus says that the divine way is to do, then you will know. To the degree that you obey what you know, you will receive more truth. This was the lesson that the nobleman whose son was deathly sick had to learn. He was forced to believe Jesus' words despite the fact that he did not witness the healing. We think seeing is believing, but to God, believing is seeing.

If you want to know if Jesus is real, here is how you must go about it: start doing what he tells you to do. Repent of your sins. Come to him for forgiveness. Cast yourself upon his mercy. Then you will know by means of an inside knowledge that no one can take away, that what he says is true. It is because his teaching is in line with reality.

And for those of us who already "know," the way to keep growing in faith is to continue doing what he asks us to do. Start treating people the way he tells you to. Instead of trying to straighten everyone else out, what Jesus is teaching me is that if I take the beam out of my own eye, then I will see clearly. Instead of ambitious self-seeking, take the lower seat. Watch what that will do to your faith.

When you do what Jesus says, you will begin to understand with a deep conviction that he knows what life is all about. If you want to "know" for sure, you must will to do the Father's will. If you truly have that deep sense of obedience and commitment, then you will know.

Jesus goes on to say that his purpose is not to glorify himself but to glorify God. This is a mark of authenticity. When you see a Bible teacher trying to make a reputation for himself, one who is impressed with his learning and ability, it certainly makes you wonder if he is authentic. People are much more drawn to one who leaves us with a greater love for God and a heart to serve him.

Here is another mark of the authenticity of Jesus: He is meek and lowly of heart. He is the true and reliable witness. His teaching comes from the Father. When it is heard and obeyed, it results in fellowship with the Father.

A casual reading of the following verses (vv. 19-24) might lead one to conclude they have nothing to do with Jesus' authority, but they are an integral part of this discussion. He has just told the people that if they were willing to do God's will, they would know whether his teaching came from God. In these verses, he rebukes his audience and shows them their unwillingness to do what God requires. This is why they will not believe.

"Did not Moses give you the Law, and {yet} none of you carries out the Law? Why do you seek to kill Me?"

His argument is that Moses gave the Law, but they aren't willing to keep it (specifically the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder"). "You know the commandments," says Jesus. "If you were really willing to do God's will, you wouldn't be trying to murder me." He is endeavoring to get them to see that they are not willing to meet the first requirement for recognizing his authority: they are not willing to do God's will.

The multitude answered, "You have a demon! Who seeks to kill You?"

The crowd interrupts, obviously unaware of the leaders' plot to destroy Jesus. But the fact is that some weeks later, the same crowd will actually participate in the plot to execute him.

Jesus answered and said to them, "I did one deed, and you all marvel. On this account 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 that the Law of Moses may 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."

The deed Jesus is referring to is the miraculous healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda, recorded in chapter 5. This is the only sign that John reports Jesus did in Jerusalem. It is important to Jesus that the crowd did not understand the significance of that deed. They marveled, but they didn't grasp its meaning. They discounted it because it was done on the Sabbath. He did a marvelous thing. He healed a man who had been sick for 38 years, but because he did it on the Sabbath, they considered him a lawbreaker and wrote him off.

And so in a powerful argument Jesus exposes their blindness and hardness of heart. Reminding them that Moses gave them circumcision, here is what he says, in effect: "More accurately, it was Abraham and the patriarchs who gave you circumcision. But, for the sake of argument, I'll assume it was Moses, whom you trust implicitly. He commanded you to circumcise your little boys on the eighth day after birth. But what do you do if the eighth day falls on a Sabbath? Why, you still circumcise your child, don't you? You don't consider that you are breaking the Law by doing that, although in a sense you are, because you are working on the Sabbath. Moses certainly knew the inevitability of this problem, yet he did not insist that you wait until the next day. In effect, he established that circumcising on the Sabbath was not breaking the law. Could it be that he permitted this to warn us against becoming too legalistic in our interpretation of the law?"

Then Jesus drives the principle home: "*Do not judge according to appearance* [superficially], *but judge with righteous judgment*" [be discerning]. He is saying, "Do not allow what you have been wrongly taught about the Scriptures to prevent you from taking seriously what I am doing and saying." It was a good word to the Jews of his day. Misinformation about the Scriptures prevented them from recognizing him when he came. And it is a good word to us as well. Legalism can keep us from obedience, and ultimately from God himself. Let us not allow what we have been taught about the Lord to keep us from coming to him with open minds and hearts.

Next Saturday, I will have the privilege of marrying a couple whom I believe are in the process of becoming Christians. A number of months ago, they attended the wedding of their friend here at PBC, and they were moved by the reality of the message they heard. They asked a few questions, and they heard that we had a class on marriage. As they were engaged to be married, they decided to attend, and they were fascinated by the truth of the Scriptures and by the lives of those who shared. So they started to attend church on Sunday, and they loved it. They called the church office to ask if perhaps one of our pastors would consider marrying them. Well, we have been in counseling together, and it is very exciting to watch them. Their assignment is to read the gospel of John. They have many questions, but I know that as they come to this book with teachable hearts and minds, they will eventually open their lives to Jesus.

And that same excitement can also be true for those of us who have been Christians for a while. Perhaps your relationship with Christ has become stale through neglect or sin. Maybe you feel the Lord is tired of your failure, that you have used up all your forgiveness stamps, and you have given up. It's not true! If you believe that, forget all that you have been taught about Jesus in the past. Come to him today. Believe who he is. Believe his words and respond to them, and you will find yourself back again on the path to life.

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