

Equal With God

John 5.19-24; 37-47

February 18, 2024

But He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working."

¹⁸ *For this reason 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.*

¹⁹ *Therefore Jesus 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. ²⁰ "For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and the Father will show Him greater works than these, so that you will marvel. ²¹ "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes. ²² "For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, ²³ so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him. ²⁴ "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.*

³⁷ *"And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form. ³⁸ "You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent.*

³⁹ *"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; ⁴⁰ and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life. ⁴¹ "I do not receive glory from men; ⁴² but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves. 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 you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God? ⁴⁵ "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. ⁴⁶ "For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. ⁴⁷ "But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?"*

We're looking at the speeches, the longer conversations and discourses of Jesus Christ in *The Fourth Gospel*. We've looked at the long dialogue with the important Jewish congressman, *Nicodemus*. Today, we hope to spend one week on a sermon of Jesus Christ spoken to the clergy in Jerusalem after Jesus healed someone who'd been sick for 38 years (5.5). You'd think that a miracle for such a man would be an occasion for public awe and wild celebration... but instead the clergymen found fault in Jesus' actions and the speech of Jesus was in answer to their complaints.

This is the first real sermon recorded in *John's Gospel*. There've been some conversations in which Jesus taught (one-on-one) ...but this is the first lengthy public teaching of Jesus Christ, we've seen this year.

This speech by Jesus to the Jewish clergymen, strikes the modern reader as ... sort of ... complex, difficult or even enigmatic... a lot of modifiers and qualifiers. And yet, this teaching is not meant to mystify us but is meant to begin clarifying the two most distinctive ideas in all of Christianity.

These two ideas are revolutionary; they're important and are actually essential to the whole way of thinking that Christianity is. So much so, that while we can afford to differ on certain "non-essentials" (e.g., How should baptism be done? How should a church be governed?... or any number of ethical issues on which Christians of good conscience may differ) ... There ARE, in the Christian Church, and among sincere Christians certain "grey areas" that are not trivial but are NOT considered indispensable teachings.

But these two BIG IDEAS, that Jesus addressed, if you get these wrong ... you have missed what is THE UNIQUE CORE that makes Christianity unique and different from any other approach to life. If a person knowingly rejects these two truths, that person may be religious or spiritual but cannot be an authentic believer in the real Jesus.

Here are the two ideas and then we'll look at them:

- 1. Who Jesus Christ is i.e. the Divine Son of God**
- 2. How a person benefits from what Jesus does i.e. the way of faith.**

This sermon is introduced by a controversy. Jesus Christ heals a man on the Jewish Sabbath day and the Jewish leaders were irate about it.

So, Jesus explains His actions by saying, "Well, the reason I work on the Sabbath day is because that's what GOD DOES on the Sabbath day." And He reasons like this: "WHILE THE GENESIS ACCOUNT says that God rested on the seventh day of creation, we know that God does NOT really rest every Sabbath day. If He did, the planets would leave their orbits; the rivers would stop flowing; *our own blood would stop circulating in our veins* and the molecules that make up the whole material universe would all fly apart!

God is always at work, governing and sustaining the universe. God heals every day.

And the controversy with the clergymen ends with Jesus saying: "*The reason I work is that God works on the Sabbath day...*" and the Jewish leaders get the idea that Jesus is equating Himself with God.

"For this reason, the Jews were seeking to kill Him, because He was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God His own Father, making Himself equal to God..."

This sermon is Jesus' answer to that charge.

Jesus says in the sermon that He has the authority of judgment and the authority to bestow life – He claims to hold the power of life and death.

He is not like the prophets of the OT who once or twice were able to raise the dead as the instruments of God. Jesus Christ is claiming that HE has the prerogative to give life or to execute judgment AS HE WILLED. In other words: He's claiming for Himself, the divine prerogative. He's claiming to be the One Who decides who lives and who dies.

And the point the religious professionals HEAR is that whoever does what only God can do... IS... God.

Now, admittedly, the truly mysterious part of this is that Jesus, while claiming to be God, *is also somehow differentiating between the Father and Himself*. Jesus is the Son, and the Son is God (He does and is what only God does and is) but Jesus Christ can also refer to the father as “HE”.

So, somehow ...there’s BOTH a perfect one-ness in the Father and Son AND a true distinctiveness.

Now, as we sit here all these centuries later and consider these claims that Jesus made, WHAT SHOULD WE TAKE AWAY?

Well, a lot. But one thing we can’t miss and that is that Jesus COULD NOT SAY THESE THINGS AND HAVE BEEN simply a good man...or a good moral teacher.

The statistics are appalling but, according to a poll jointly commissioned by *Ligonier Ministries* and *Lifeway Publishers*, when given the statement, “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.” of Evangelical Christians (people who believe the Bible) 66% said “Strongly Agree”. BUT from the earliest Church Councils, the Bible was understood to teach that Jesus is co-eternal with the Father and UN-created.

When given the statement, “Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God.” 26% of American Bible-believers said, “Strongly Agree” i.e., that Jesus Christ was a great teacher but not God. We are denying the faith we profess to believe. How could Jesus be only a great moral teacher when He claims to be equal with God?

Good men don’t say these things about themselves. Insane men may make these kind of statements ... Pantheists who believe that ALL is God and any distinction between Creator and Creation is only an illusion (“maya”) say these things, but Jesus is neither insane nor a Pantheist... He is deliberately claiming to be God in front of the fiercest Monotheists (who above ALL believe that there is only One God). The Jewish leaders understood what He was claiming... And though He goes on to clarify it (that He is eternally begotten of the Father – as the creeds say)- He is not retracting. Not denying, not softening the claim.

And this means that for me to say, “Well, I really like Jesus Christ’s ideas on love and His ideas on the poor and forgiving others... and, you know, the main things that He stood for but ... I can’t swallow the God part...”

Well, here’s the first sermon in the *Gospel According to John* and the main thing IS the God part!

And we’re not really being asked to swallow it... IT is asking to swallow US!... I mean, if this is what He says, IT SWALLOWS EVERYTHING!

He is THE watershed issue. The way we respond to Him determines life and death, “The Father has given all judgment TO THE SON” ... and whether we will become fully alive and become what God means for humans to be or whether we will shrivel away into insignificance and miss the main point of life... depends on Him. Our eternal destiny – never ending JOY or never-ending SHAME depends on Him - He is THE watershed issue.

There is no TRUE spirituality without worshipping Jesus as God: that’s what He says; V. 23:

*“So that all will honor the Son **EVEN AS** they honor the Father.
He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.”*

To honor God without giving the same honor to Jesus Christ is NOT possible.

Point #2: Christians understand Jesus to be the Divine Son and they also understand that to benefit from what He does, a person must believe...the benefits come by the way of faith.

In the second part of this reading, Jesus Christ focuses on THIS revolutionary idea.

Before we look at what Jesus said about the way of faith, let me ask: Is this even a valid question (*"How do I benefit from Jesus Christ?"*) And the Bible's answer is: YES! This is THE Valid Question that since the point of Jesus Christ's life IS to benefit others and to give the credit for that benefit to God – as we and others benefit FROM HIM, we agree and join Him in His great purpose.

If, for instance, an exterminator comes to my home and I try to keep him FROM the pests... then (whatever may be my motive: e.g., "I don't wanna cause you extra work" ... "I don't want to look selfish" ... "I don't want you to think I'm unsanitary..." etc.) if I'm trying to prevent him from doing his designated task for whatever reason – I'm just an obstacle and I have to move so he can serve me.

This is no place for false humility.

This SECOND part of this FIRST sermon looks at:

- A. An obstacle to the way of faith**
- B. An imitation of faith (often found in religious groups)**
- C. The essence of faith (What does it really mean to believe?)**

Let's look first at the obstacle: in His teachings, Jesus exposes a number of faith-blockers (Luke 8.4ff). But *here*, speaking to the clergymen, Jesus puts His finger on "the approval system."

v. 44 *"How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another, and you do not receive the glory that is from the one and only God?"*

Jesus is saying that these Jewish leaders had become content with a form of spirituality that was purely horizontal in orientation and people-centered (we saw it with Nicodemus a few weeks ago). They were ONLY interested in getting approval from others.

And they loved it so much that if believing in Jesus Christ and getting true approval from God Himself ... if that COST them the approval of their peers ... they'd rather say, "No Thanks!" to Jesus and would refuse the true approval, infinite approval of God.

You know, we are all starved for applause. We're MADE for glory. We are made for what the Bible calls, *"the eternal weight of glory"*. (2 Cor.4.17)

God made us for significance, to live weighty and important lives that culminate in our hearing the applause of heaven as we cross the finish line and God, our heavenly Father embraces us.

Our society's obsession with looks, with fame and celebrity, with conspicuous consumption.... These are all symptoms of the TRUTH of how God made us for glory.

BUT these indicators are also signs of our being content with the sparks of human approval when Jesus Christ is offering us the infinitely bright Sun of God's never-fading glory.

Jesus says (v.41) *"I don't receive glory from people"*, i.e. "I see through that! I know what it is to be accepted by the Father and all other approval is just tacky glitter compared to that! It doesn't satisfy... it leaves you in the throes of an addiction ...trying to top yourself... get a new trinket ... do some even WILDER exploit... achieve greater success ... win a bigger award... tell a funnier joke...look prettier in the mirror ...stay in the spotlight of human approval... dress to impress...impress...impress... impress..."

Jesus Christ says (v.42), "You don't know the love of God like I do... If you did, you'd be free of the need to impress people and the need to be impressed BY people ... and you'd believe in Me...EVEN IF people disapproved" – that's the obstacle – human applause.

Second: an obstacle and, second, an alternative TO the way of faith. Jesus targets religious expertise:

These professional religious guys knew that one powerful arena where one can get people's approval is church. They did it by becoming very knowledgeable in the Scriptures so they could impress people and that made them feel good about themselves ... gave them a sense of "life."

"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life..."

They were such experts in the Law of Moses... but impressing others with their expertise was the goal of their learning. It would be like a man who studied a shovel, knew every contour and bend and memorized every square millimeter of it but never DUG IN THE GARDEN... or study a violin, each string every nuance of the neck and the bridge and the body and yet remained content to NEVER play a note.

One primary purpose of the *Law of Moses*, that they studied incessantly, was to show them the failings of their obedience. V.45 *"Moses is the one who accuses you."* The next and greater purpose of the Bible, they always studied, was to promise a Messiah who would obey the Law of Moses IN OUR PLACE. V. 46 *"Moses wrote about Me!"* And here He was and they could not recognize Him... All they could see was the ways they were better than the people who didn't have the Scriptures ...The Scriptures were never allowed to pierce them and take root in them. V. 47 *"You don't believe Moses, and therefore, you won't believe Me!"*

That's why Jesus Christ said, *"God's word is not in you."* You've missed the whole point.

The Scriptures DO tell about life... but they only speak to the broken...only to people who see their own failings... that's the tragedy for so many people who get content with religion and their own righteousness... they're so close but so far.

Last, Jesus points to the faith-obstacle of people-approval, then a faith-alternative of using religious knowledge to GET that approval and finally the essence of faith and how they didn't have it... "you will not come to Me, that you may have life". Coming to Jesus IS the essence of faith.

Faith is seeing that He is the end and goal of the Scriptures- (v.40) *"they speak of Me"*

They were looking at the Bible and feeling so smug ... they looked at the Gentiles and at the loose and liberal, less-serious Jews and they told themselves, *"we have the words of Moses and you don't!"*

But Jesus says *"don't you see that Moses accuses you! ... Because you're confident in your own goodness: and in your own serious efforts to keep the commands that Moses spoke and you have not kept those*

commands like you think you have. You're fooling yourselves but you're not fooling God... you're NOT fooling Me!

If you really agreed with Moses, you'd be overjoyed to see ME... "at last Someone to save us from our huge failings!" ... But you're so convinced you don't need Me it shows that you don't even get Moses!

I have come into the world, God in human flesh, I have come for the bad. Just come to Me in all your inglorious badness. Just put down your TINSEL awards and the approval you've gotten at church... or at the local bar ... or at the club ...PTA... or from the chamber of commerce... gym... work (however you impress people).

Show Me NOT your man-made glory (it doesn't impress Me!) ... INSTEAD, bring Me your shame... your failings and sins...your disappointments and inabilities ... your regrets and fears...and I will wear them for you... I'll carry you and I'll begin to liberate you to love.

I came not to approve the successful, nor to accuse the failures...I CAME to succeed FOR you and stand ACCUSED IN YOUR PLACE...

Moses points to your failings... so, agree with him...agree that you've failed... turn a deaf ear to the people who applaud you... The words of Moses curse you...but I am the Divine Son and I have come to be cursed in your place (Gal 3.13) ... to lose My glory and be clothed in the shame you deserve... so that YOU may have the applause that frees you to love.

I can do nothing for the self-satisfied and complacent ... How will you ever trust in Me if you only believe in yourselves and the applause you get from one another?

... but if you will come, acknowledging your sin and you keep coming (giving the Exterminator repeated access to your life) ... you will find that I am, the friend of sinners ...and I will give you Life and the power to LOVE.

Q U O T E S

[He] told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was... the person chiefly offended in all offenses.

Christ says that He is 'humble and meek' and we believe Him; not noticing that, if He were merely a man, humility and meekness are the very last characteristics we could attribute to some of His sayings.

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell... Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.

You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.

— C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book II, CH 3, “The Shocking Alternative”