

“Christ in the Scriptures”

John 5:31-47

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Text Comment

- v.32 The Lord, of course, doesn't mean that his witness is false, he is only pointing out that a man is not accepted on the basis of his own claims about himself. There must be the witness of another. Jesus has his Father's witness and it is true, whether or not the Jews accept it.
- v.35 A witness had been given them that they could understand and appreciate – viz. the witness of John the Baptist. And they did appreciate him; they regarded him highly and flocked in huge numbers to hear him. But in the end they did not accept his witness about Jesus.
- v.36 In John 15:24 the Lord speaks of his having done works that no one else did. His works – from his many miracles to his death and resurrection – are the testimony that he has come from God.
- v.42 The basic idea is that Jesus is committed to praising and giving glory to his Father not of pleasing men. So he is not dismayed if men do not praise him, and all the more because he knows their hearts and knows, therefore, that any praise they would give him would not be motivated by the love of God.
- v.44 As one commentator puts it: “The chief punishment of the liar is not so much that he is not believed but that he does not believe; similarly, the chief judgment on those who deny that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Son of God, is not so much that they have no Messiah, but that they follow false Messiahs.” [Carson, 265] There were many messianic pretenders in those days. Indeed, Jewish historians have identified no less than 64 of them! [Morris, 333n] These claimants, like all before and after them, worked their will on the people by flattery, by telling them what they wanted to hear. Jesus was not like them, concerned as he was not for man's glory, but for God's. The Lord knows he will not be acceptable to his generation, for that reason. He is saying, in effect, that these people are not honest in their religion. They have hidden motives for their views and they are not really seeking the truth and the truth alone but rather what pleases them. The true cause of their unbelief was a want of honesty and of godly sincerity. [Ryle, *Expository Thoughts: John*, i, 322]

Here is Bishop Ryle's comment on these verses. “If a man is not thoroughly honest in his professed desire to find out the truth in religion, -- if he secretly cherishes any idol which he is resolved not to give up [idol of mind, of thought, of body, whatever], -- if he privately cares for anything more than God's praise, -- he will go on to the end of his days doubting, perplexed, dissatisfied, and restless, and will never find the way to peace. His insincerity of heart is an insuperable barrier in the way of his believing.”

Calvin puts it more succinctly: “the door of faith is shut against all whose minds are filled with a vain desire for earthly glory.”

- v.47 The Jews, of course, were proud of their connection with Moses, so this blast was particularly jarring. Their rejection of Jesus was a rejection of Moses!

Many people today think of Christianity as a new religion that sprung up in the first century. They would not deny that it had its antecedents in Judaism – we speak, after all, of the “Judeo-Christian tradition” --, but even many Christians think that what began with the life and ministry of Jesus was something profoundly, distinctly new. But that was not the view of the early Christians themselves. It was not John’s view and, more important, it was not Jesus’ view.

What we have here in John 5 is a kind of typical family squabble. It is about the inheritance. To whom does it belong? “To us, of course,” said the Jews of Jesus’ day. We are Abraham’s descendants; we have the law of Moses; we obey his commandments.” “Not at all!” said the Christians. “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the things that Abraham did, who rejoiced to see ahead of time the day of Jesus Christ. If you were loyal to Moses, you would believe in Jesus, for Moses wrote about him.” “No,” the Christians said, following Christ himself, “the true children of Abraham, the true Israelites, are those who believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of the world.”

Or, to put it in more modern terms, think of what is happening here as a kind of modern Wall Street takeover battle. The old established firm is the Judaism of the first century. The brash newcomers are the Christians and they are claiming the right to take over the company. But what is more, they are claiming that the original founder of the firm had always intended for the company to be run by people like them, according to their principles and beliefs, and that the present management team was ruining the company and perverting all of its founder’s original intentions and hopes for his firm. [Revised from Morna Hooker, *Beginnings; Keys that Open the Gospels*, 77-78]

Christ and the Christians laid claim to the entire assets of the company and, in particular, its charter. They claimed that the entire purpose of the law was summed up in the teaching, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is very interesting, for example, that many of the nouns that the Lord Jesus will use in his famous “I am” sayings in the Gospel of John, were already used by the Jews to describe the Law of Moses. “I am the bread, I am the light, the life, the way, the truth...” All these words had been applied by the Jews to the Mosaic scriptures. But Jesus was claiming that those same Scriptures simply pointed to Him. He was their meaning and their fulfillment. They were not given to Israel for any other reason but to lead her to Jesus Christ and faith in him. And, of course, the Christians claimed, the Lord’s actions, his miracles, his death and resurrection, his ascension, his sending of the Holy Spirit – all of this proved that these claims made for Jesus were true. He was God’s Son, he was God himself, the Son.

Now we can well appreciate how controversial that claim was when made to the Jews of Jesus’ day. It amounted to a repudiation of their understanding of the Scriptures and their own history. And, of course, it couldn’t help but amount to a condemnation of them and of their religious

attitude. If what Jesus said were true, it would mean, it had to mean, that Christ had spoken the truth when he said, in v. 42, that these deeply religious people did not have the love of God in them. Far from lovers of God they were rebels against him. Far from doing his will, they were rejecting God's will. They made a profession of loving God, but really they only loved their own ideas about God. And the indubitable proof of that was that when God himself came among them, they rejected him because he didn't conform to *their own* ideas of what God should say and do!

No one should minimize the offense contained in such a claim and such a statement. People hate to have their motives impugned and they particularly hate to be told that the very thing they claim for themselves and deeply believe about themselves is not true. *No wonder they crucified the Lord of glory!* He accused them of not loving God and of being unfaithful to Moses – the very things that were their pride and glory as Jews.

Nor should we suppose that the situation described in these verses – a people sure of their loyalty to the Bible but deeply mistaken about that loyalty, a people confident of their standing with God but, in fact, all the while standing *against* God – is unique to the pages of the New Testament and the situation of first century Judaism.

In the 20th century we were treated to a weary succession of teachers and movements all professing their loyalty to the Bible and all making a mockery of its plain and straightforward teaching. We had so-called Marxist readers of the Bible who found in God's Word the basic message of class-struggle and economic liberation. We had so-called capitalist readers of the Bible who found in God's Word the vindication of the market and the middle class. We had a large variety of social-gospel and liberationist readers of the Bible who found its central vision to be that of political empowerment. We had existentialist readers of the Bible who found its true message to be that the meaning of life can be found only in the actualization of the self. Most feminists reject the Bible, but some have tried to find in it an anti-patriarchal manifesto. We have had, for a long time, a fringe of white supremacist, anti-Semitic interpreters of the Bible. And so on.

And such outrages against the Bible multiply even as we speak. I noticed in the most recent number of *First Things* [June/July 2000, 89-90] the bitingly sarcastic notice of a comment on Mark 1 in the guide, *Celebrating the Eucharist*, the Mass guide published by Liturgical Press and used by thousands of Catholic parishes. "After Jesus cast out the unclean spirit, we read in Mark that 'All were amazed and asked one another, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.'"*Celebrating the Eucharist* comments: 'Jesus' authority is not a 'power over' but a truth that calls forth life. His is an authority that derives from modeling how a true servant of God lives.' [Mr. Neuhaus now comments:] If I get this right, the problem with the evil spirits is that they wanted to serve God but lacked an adequate role model until Jesus came along. In Mark it is said, 'The unclean spirit convulsed the man and with a loud cry came out of him.' In the psychobabbled Mass guide, one infers that the unclean spirit said something like, 'Thanks, Jesus, I needed that.' There are no convulsions or loud cries, although one imagines there might be some gagging in the pews."

The majesty of the Bible is such, its attractive power is such, that it has been co-opted as authority for every conceivable idea, no matter how obviously inconsistent with what the Bible actually says, no matter how weird or how evil. Cicero once wrote, "There is nothing so absurd or incredible that it has not been asserted by one philosopher or another." Well, we might say, there is no idea sufficiently crackpot, there is no religious conviction sufficiently bizarre, that people have not tried to find support for it in the Bible. And in our post-modern age, where texts are now thought to be waxed noses capable of being bent into any preferred shape, we can expect many more of these travesties being visited on the Bible, not less.

In that way, there is nothing all that surprising here in John 5. The Bible had often been misread in Israel's history. Read the Old Testament and you will find the prophets over and over again telling Israel that the religion they are practicing, that their beliefs cannot be squared with the teaching of Moses. And, ever since, times without number, the church has taken the Bible and used it to support doctrines it does not teach, used it to substantiate religious belief that cannot be found within its pages.

It is often claimed nowadays that we must make allowances for many different religious viewpoints because we live in a pluralist age, we face the fact of religious differences in a way that men did not before, we must reckon with the fact, in a way they did not, that the human race worships God in many different ways. It is simply religious imperialism to claim that one way, that our way is right and all others wrong.

But, of course, that isn't true at all. Pluralism isn't new. There were more faiths competing for attention in the first century Greco-Roman world than in our own day. The variety of faith in antiquity was greater than it is today. But that did not embarrass the Christians anymore than it had their leader, Jesus Christ himself. For the appearance in the world of the creator of the world, the appearance among men of the maker of all men, the appearance of one who had given the Scripture to Israel, the appearance in the world of the one who had delivered the law to Moses and who will someday judge all mankind according to that law, his marvelous life and example, his teaching with such authority and goodness, his mighty miracles, his death and then his resurrection, his ascension to the Right Hand of God, all of this had settled the question of true religion, of the right understanding of the law of Moses, of the identify of the Book that is the Word of God, and of the only possible way of salvation.

And so it remains today, just as in the days of the Lord's ministry. Christ is the key that unlocks all meaning and confessing Christ as the Messiah, the Lord, the Son of God is the essential prerequisite of any true knowledge, any true love of God, any true understanding of his will. This the Jews would not do and for refusing to do cut themselves off from light and life. And, still today, multitudes will not do this to the same dismal end, no matter what they may protest to the contrary.

We cannot avoid this scandal, for scandal it is. It became inevitable as soon as Jesus Christ stepped into the world and declared that "no one can come to the Father except by me." Christ, being the Son of God, your view of him must be your view of God, your view of his will must be your view of God's will.

This is our problem as Christians. If there are unbelievers in church this morning, you should not despise us for this. If anything, you should have sympathy for us. We must always go around pronouncing this judgment on others. If they do not believe in Jesus Christ, if they do not receive him as the Son of God, the Lord, the Savior, if they do not follow him, the love of God is not in them. It's no fun to tell people that. You usually don't even have to tell them that. Just tell them they must believe in Jesus and they will understand what you are saying about them; they will gather that you are saying that until and unless they become Christians they are not right with God no matter their lives, no matter their religion. And, inevitably, they will take you to mean that you think you are better than they. That is no fun. A recent book on evangelical Christianity by a Duke University professor reports that most American adults have been "witnessed to" by an evangelical Christian and most of them considered it an unpleasant experience! Let me tell you unbelievers with us this morning, *we understand that!* And we know why they should think that!

It is much easier to get along with people and to be liked by them, to be popular and well-thought-of if you tell others that their views are as valid as yours and their philosophy of life as legitimate as yours. *But, of course, Christians can't do that. No one can do that who believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that his death on the cross is the only conceivable way for sinners to be at peace with God.*

Our challenge in forcing others to consider the implications of the claims of Jesus Christ is to make clear that the scandal of that, the offense of that arises from the truth itself and not from any harshness, or arrogance, or judgmentalism, or intellectual imperialism on our part. We are helped in that by the knowledge that we can share with others that everything we are saying that the truth of Christ reveals about them – for example, that the love of God is not really in them if they do not believe in Jesus Christ – is truth that we have found proved in ourselves first. Even we who are the followers of Jesus find the rebel spirit within. Even we who believe in him know how often and how easily the love of God departs from our hearts and how easily we seek to cover up our lack of love for God and our great love for ourselves with religious words and deeds. How real, how true must the Lord Jesus' verdict be, if even his own followers must acknowledge that far too much of the time it is still true of them! They were hard words, we do not deny it. They were offensive words. The people who heard them did not like them. We know that. But we also know that true words were never spoken than when Jesus said of men and women, "you do not have the love of God in your hearts."

You may love many things, you certainly love yourselves. But if you really loved God, you would love his Son and you would love God's Word. It was, it is, it will always remain as simple as that!

I once read his friend say of a great Christian, "More than any man I ever knew, he trusted every word, revered every word, and loved every word in the book of God." [Moody Stuart of Rabbi Duncan in *Just a Talker*, xxxiv] That is right. That is what a real Christian will do and will aspire to do. Not find in the Bible support for his own ideas, but bend his mind and heart to know, to learn, and to embrace the truth of God. That is what the Jews of Jesus' day, by and large, had not done. They had made up a religion and then gone to the Bible to find support for

it, and had tortured the Bible and its plain teaching to make it deliver up that support. Many who have called themselves Christians have done the same through the ages.

But, once Christ is seen and found and loved and trusted, once it is known that the Bible is his book and it is about him and about his salvation, then one comes to it, to Moses or to Paul, seeking only one thing – the voice, the mind of Christ himself. The truth about him!

John Wesley, in a preface he wrote to a collection of his sermons, said this.

“I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air... I want to know one thing – the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri [a man of one book]. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book...” [Preface to *Sermons on Several Occasions*]

That is right. That is wise. That is the way we all ought to feel about the Bible. But, the Jews thought it was God’s book. They had a great reverence for it. They studied it carefully at great length. Their problem was that they came to the Bible with their minds already made up. They were not honestly seeking to find the truth, they were seeking confirmation for their own opinions. This is the danger to which we are all exposed. The greatness of that danger is proved by the fact that when Jesus Christ came among the very people who prided themselves on being God’s own people, they refused to receive him and instead crucified him, absolutely confident that in executing the Prince of Life they were showing their reverence for God.

We cannot make someone believe, as we do that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that Moses spoke of him and that all the rest of the Bible is the revelation of him and the explanation of how he is the way, the truth, and the life. We can urge people to believe in Jesus Christ, we can give them many good arguments for why they should believe in Jesus. But the issue lies not in the head, not first, but in the heart. That is what Jesus is saying in vv. 42-44.

“The great principle contained in the[ese] verse[s] is the close connection between the state of a man’s heart and his possessing the gift of faith. Believing or not believing...is not a thing that depends only on a man’s head being satisfied, and his intellect convinced. It depends far more on the state of a man’s heart.” [Ryle, 322]

If there are other loves, other idols, other cherished desires, other things one wants more from other men or from this world than peace with God and the knowledge of his salvation, these things will prove an insurmountable barrier to a clear sight of Jesus Christ and to true faith in him. That was the problem with the Jews. Other loves had crowded out the true love of God. No one wants to believe that about himself, that he is insincere, that he is not really seeking God. But the Jews of Christ’s day are a mirror in which we can see ourselves and all other men. Christ came threatening those other loves and demanding their love for himself – and he had an absolute right to their love – and they killed him for it.

We've seen the same thing a thousand times ourselves. We've seen the door of faith shut tight against those who loved other things and themselves too much really to love God. How sure they were that they knew the truth. How they scorned the very idea that their rejection of Christ was evidence of the hardness of their own hearts. We know it is hard to hear that. We know full well people will be offended when we say it. They were when Jesus said it. But it is true. And we can see the truth of it within ourselves. Still, even in the most sincere Christians, the love of God must fight for a place in our hearts. How we long for the day when it will no longer be so and God's love will fill up our hearts to the brim.

Then we will discover how happy a human being can be and how unspeakably kind God was to send his Son into the world that we rebels might know the praise that comes from the only God.