

## John 5:16-29

We are continuing this morning with our study of John's Gospel, picking up at verse 16 of chapter 5 and working through to verse 29 of the same chapter. If you do not have a Bible of your own, the text is printed in the bulletin for you and there are also a few extra Bibles around the room that you can make use of, if you so desire.

Now, those of you who have been with us for all or part of this series will know that John's Gospel or "good news" is a brief and selective biography of Jesus' life for the express purpose of seeing people - especially his Jewish audience - accept Jesus as the One, as the Messiah that God had promised to send to save his people from their sins.

And, in order for John's readers to accept Jesus as the Messiah - *especially* his Jewish readers - he will have to help them to see how it is that Jesus who was most certainly a man, who lived as men live and who died as men die - this same man, Jesus, was also more than a man and was, in fact God. And in thinking about this, you have to keep in mind the fact that the Jewish people were *fierce* monotheists, i.e., they firmly believed that there was only one God - and rightly so. And since they were so strongly persuaded of this fact, John has to *address* or at least *attempt* to address this issue of how you could have one person claiming to be the Son of God, and a separate entity that was God the Father - and yet still be dealing with one God, not two. In short, John had to show them that God was more *complex* than they realized and yet he had to do this without destroying the *unity or Oneness of God*.

Now John has been working away at this from the very first verses in this Gospel where he tied the person and work of Jesus to the work of God the Creator. And there have been a number of other installments along the way which have underscored, among other things, this unique identity of Jesus as the one who was both *fully human* and, at the same time, had the same authority and power and prerogatives as God himself.

As we saw last week, up to this point in Jesus' ministry we have seen him going about teaching and healing and doing various things which revealed these unique aspects of his identity - and without too much opposition. To be sure, there have been glimpses here and there, of rejection but nothing major has occurred yet.

However, from chapter 5 onward we are seeing the rise of the "official" opposition to Jesus - that which came not from isolated individuals but from the Jewish religious authorities in that day. And the "official" opposition that gets kicked off here will continue to grow throughout Jesus ministry up to the point where he is arrested and then crucified. And, while the death of Jesus was, on the one hand, a terrible thing it was, on the other hand, a *necessary thing* that simply *had* to happen if God was going to save his people.

And this fact, too, as we saw last week, was an important thing for John to address in his Gospel, because it helped his *Jewish* audience to understand how and why the *Messiah* that they had always expected to come and conquer did *in fact* come and conquer - but not at all in the way that they had imagined he would.

In our study last week we looked at the first 16 verses of chapter 5 and saw this incident where Jesus healed an invalid on the Sabbath. And, while Jesus was certainly concerned for the well-being of this man, it also seems that his healing of this particular man, and the instructions he gave him afterward, both of those things were intended to make a specific point and to bring about a confrontation between himself and the religious leaders of that day. And this is certainly what happened.

The verses before us this morning will look more closely at the aftermath to this healing, both how the authorities responded to Jesus, and then how Jesus responded to them. And this whole section, which begins here at verse 16 and runs through to verse 47, is structured very much like a legal procedure, almost like a sort of “verbal” trial.

Now you don’t really catch that flavor as much in the English translation as you might in the Greek - although it is still there in the English. But if you look at some of the original words you find, for example, that in verse 16 when it says, “...and this was why the Jews were *persecuting* Jesus...” – the word used for “persecuting” there is one which, typically, is used to describe the *prosecution* of a person in a trial. And so the “persecution” described here, at least in these early stages, is likely a *verbal* persecution in the form of charges or accusations being brought by the religious leaders.

And then in verse 17 and again in verse 19 you have the statements, “But Jesus *answered* them” and “So Jesus said to them”, respectively. The curious thing, however, is that we aren’t actually told *what* Jesus was responding to, or what *question* or *charge* he is answering. John, the *Gospel* writer has given us a *summary*. But we don’t ever hear what the authorities were actually saying themselves. We don’t have a record of their charges. We just have John’s summary, and then we are just told that Jesus responded to them and answered them.

And so, if you put this together with what was just said about verse 16, then what we likely have here is the record of Jesus’ responses to *formal* charges or at the very least *complaints* that had been brought against him by the local religious authorities. And, indeed, when you look at the structure of this whole section it seems very much to fit with that sort of judicial format.

So, for example, in verses 16-18, you have the summary of the formal charges that are being leveled at Jesus by the authorities. Then, in verses 19-29 you have Jesus response to these charges - or “the defense”. Following that, from verse 30 through about verse 37, you have an appeal to various witnesses and, finally, in verses 38-47 you see Jesus move from defending himself to now prosecuting his accusers.

That’s a long introduction. But with that overall structure and movement in mind, let’s pray and then we’ll have a look at the text itself....let’s pray....

*Great Father in heaven, please come and feed your people now. Please work through this foolishness we call “preaching the word” and through the fool that preaches it, to bring wisdom to your people, and to confound the proud, and to humble the strong, and to draw and then shape a people for your very own. We ask this in Jesus’ name, Amen.....*

At the beginning of this section we see John giving two summary statements which constitute the formal charge – the accusations that the religious authorities were making against Jesus. The first accusation they bring against Jesus has to do with his violation of what they understood to be binding regulations for the Sabbath.

Now, as we saw last week, the “laws” that were being “violated” here were not the actual laws of God as they appeared in the Old Testament but, instead, were some of the many man-made “bylaws” - so to speak - that the Jewish authorities had created and attached to God’s law, as an extension of it. These bylaws functioned like a fence *within a fence* and their purpose, while well meaning perhaps, actually did more harm than good and put the people under a life-sucking and grace-smothering sort of bondage that no one could bear.

And so, when Jesus healed the invalid at the pool of Bethesda, he broke one of these bylaws, in their eyes at least, and so as far as they were concerned he had violated the moral law about the Sabbath, as found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.

And one thing that is interesting in all this is that Jesus did NOT respond to them by talking to them about their wrong use of the law. He didn’t get into a discussion with them about how they were adding to God’s law and how they were completely misunderstanding what the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment was all about. Jesus doesn’t have that sort of discussion with them - which he could have done and, no doubt, if he had, would have won that argument.

But Jesus doesn’t do that. Instead he chooses to say something that he knows will only further enrage them and, as a result, marches deliberately into the face of controversy. In response to their charge that he has violated the Sabbath Jesus says, “My father is working until now, and I am working.” In other words, Jesus is saying “if it’s okay for my Father to be working, then it’s okay for me to work”. To put it more pointedly, if they’re going to charge *Jesus* with breaking the Sabbath, then they’re going to have to charge *God* too.

In response to this verse, one commentator hits the nail on the head when he says, “in order for this defense to be valid, the same factors that apply to *God* would have to apply to Jesus himself”. So, when Jesus argues that God is allowed to do a certain type of work on the Sabbath - and therefore he is allowed to do so - Jesus is equating the work that he is doing to the work of God - i.e., he is making a claim to divinity here and to the divine privilege of doing the sorts of things on the Sabbath that only one who was God himself had the authority to do.

And so Jesus doesn’t waste any time in saying the worst possible thing he could say to create trouble for himself. And, while there is a certain deliberate-ness to what Jesus does here, he isn’t just doing these things for the sake of stirring people up. He’s not just picking a fight to pick a fight - although it may seem that way. Rather, his motivation here is to simply BE who he truly is and DO what he came to do - and let the chips fall where they may. And the natural consequence of his doing all this was to stir up all sorts of trouble for himself and to enrage the hatred of the religious leaders who were blind to the things of God.

And so, while the initial charge is that Jesus is breaking the sabbath, the deeper and more serious charge is that he is *blaspheming* by making himself equal to God.

In response to these charges, Jesus sets out in verse 19 and following to defend his actions and statements and to show that he is not blaspheming by making himself equal to God and, therefore, if he is not blaspheming then neither is he violating the Sabbath but is, in fact, the Lord of the Sabbath, and as a result can do with it what he wishes.

What follows verse 18 then are a number of fairly dense, tightly packed statements which contain far more theological content than we will be able to unpack here but which will help us to better understand this relationship that Jesus alludes to when he refers to God as “*my father*”. Again, we will not unpack everything here, but we will look at some of the broad features of how Jesus wanted people to understand his relationship to God.

Firstly, one thing that Jesus wanted his accusers to understand was that in claiming divine prerogatives for himself, and in claiming God as his *personal* Father, he wasn’t saying that he was *another* or a *second God* that was equal to or in competition with the Creator God. He was saying that He was divine and that in that divinity was *inseparably linked* to God the Father. Jesus makes this clear in a number of places within this text.

For example, he says in vs 19 that “*the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but ONLY what he sees the Father doing.*” To that he adds, “*For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him ALL that he himself is doing...*”

(Side Note: The word for “love”, when it says “the Father loves the Son” - that word is *phileo*, not *agapao*. The teaching that’s gone around for some time now that THE Greek word that is used to describe the “highest” kind of love - the love of God for his Son - as *agapao* - that idea is simply not true, as this verse indicates. And I only say that to say, it is very easy to abuse languages and to draw conclusions on the basis of linguistics that are simply not true - as this verse demonstrates - so be careful when you hear those sorts of arguments from people)

Anyway, I digress. But the point is that Jesus’ language here in verses 19 and 20 shows that His divinity is not to be understood apart from that of God the Father. There is an inseparable connection between them.

A second thing that Jesus wanted his accusers to understand was that while his divinity was inseparable from that of God the Father, it was also, in some sense, *submissive* to God the Father. You see this too in a number of places.

For starters, there is the simple observation that Jesus consistently refers to and views the relationship he has as that of a *Son* to a *Father* - not as a collegial relationship but rather as one that has an inherent element of submission to it. Then there is the thing which we have already seen - the fact that the son only does what he sees the Father doing.

To put it another way, he does not act independently of the Father, but always in imitation of and in conjunction with the Father. But clearly in this relationship there is a sort of one-way-ness to it. The Father does not do what he sees the Son doing, but the other way around.

Even further there is vs 22 where we see the Father giving over to Jesus a certain function that is originally and rightly his own - namely the function of judgment and then in vs 26 there is the statement that the Father has "*granted the Son also to have life in himself*". Now I'll say more about these in a moment, but the thing to notice here is the fact that it is the Father who is doing the "giving over" and the "granting" mentioned in these verses - not the Son. And so there is a certain direction in their relationship - what theologians sometimes call an "economic" distinction within the Godhead by which the Son submits willingly to the Father and exists, eternally, in this sort of Father/Son relationship.

A third thing that Jesus wants his accusers to understand about his claim to divinity is not only that He is distinct but inseparable from God the Father, and also in a certain sense submissive to God, he is, nevertheless, also *equivalent* to God in terms of his divinity and his power and authority. This too is seen in a number of places in these verses.

For example, there is the statement we have already seen in verse 17 where Jesus says, "*My Father is working until now, and I am working*" - which implies that Jesus IS doing and CAN do the very things that God the Father does. In the Old Testament it is clear that God alone is the one who is the Author and giver of life. It is equally clear that it is God the Father who is "the Judge" and has the sole right and authority to render judgments upon humankind. But both of these things which are the prerogative of God himself have been granted to Jesus, as we see in verses 21 and 22.

Even further, there is the statement in verse 26, "*For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself*". Jesus has life in the same way that God the Father does. And how is it that God the Father has life? Does he borrow it from another? No. Does he inherit from another? No. Is there some other life source that *preceded* his own, and from which he drew life? No. God is "eternally, self-existent". He is the source of his own life. And here Jesus says that he, the Son, has life in exactly the same way. He life is not derived from God. He is not an emanation of God. His is not a life that had a beginning but, like the Father, is a life that has always been. There has never been a time when Jesus was not right there, existing eternally alongside his Father. Language such as this is a strong statement of Jesus' divinity and equality with God. Indeed, it is because he has life just as God does that he can also be the source of life for others - both in raising people from the dead and in granting eternal life.

Finally, there is the statement in verse 23 that, "*Whoever does not honor the Son, does not honor the Father.*" Again, a very strong statement of both unity with God and also equality with God. The Son is worthy of the *same* honor and glory as the Father himself.

And so, at the end of the day, what we have in these verses are some of the most essential understandings and teachings about the doctrine of Christ and, in particular, how he relates to God the Father. We see that he is distinct in his person from God the Father and yet he is not a second God but rather must be kept inseparably connected to God the Father such that you cannot have one without the other. We further see that there is a kind of filial, Father-Son relationship between them, that there is a real ordering in their manner of relating to one another and a real submission that God the Son exercises toward God the Father.

Finally, we see that, his filial relationship notwithstanding, Jesus is equal to God the Father, does the works of God the Father, exactly and fully manifests the Father in every way and even carries out the Father's divine tasks, not merely on God's behalf, but *as* God himself.

And so in response to the charges leveled against him, that he is wrongly and blasphemously making himself out to be God's equal, Jesus lays out for them, in a very few words, the nature of his relationship to his Father in heaven and shows how it CAN be and in fact IS the case that a person such as he, who is distinct from God in heaven can nevertheless rightfully claim to share the same divinity.

And in speaking so strongly about his own divinity and his unity with God the Father, Jesus cannot help but emphasize the reality of *judgment* and the function of *judging*, that dominate the landscape of verses 22-29. And he emphasizes it for two reasons.

One reason is because, as we have seen, the role of rendering and administering the judgment of God has been given to him by his Father and for the express purpose of seeing to it that "*all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father.*" But the other reason is simply that the revelation of Jesus as the divine Son of God is a revelation that calls for a response, indeed, it demands a response. As verse 24 says, whoever accepts this word about Jesus has - right now, present tense - eternal life and "*has passed from death to life*".

But for those who do not accept this word about Jesus, they come under judgment, the first sign of which is seen in their rejection of Jesus, i.e., in their refusing to believe that He is who He says He is.

And lest someone think that this is no great thing, Jesus makes it clear in the closing verses of this section, that the judgment that begins in this life and is seen in a person's rejection of him, will culminate in the end with a greater judgment. Every last person will rise from the dead and then pass from there to an ultimate destiny of either eternal life or eternal judgment. And the response to Jesus NOW provides an accurate forecast of what a person can expect to see in the final judgment. In short, it matters very much how people receive and respond to Jesus in this life.

And so we see here that there is both a present and future aspect to the judgment that Jesus will bring. Those who reject him are *already condemned*, as 3:18 tells us, not by the action of Jesus but by their own action.

To put it another way, they manifest in the present a lifestyle and response that is congruent with the judicial sentencing that will be theirs in the future. Likewise, the deliverance and salvation of God's people does not start in the future, it starts right now and is also evidenced in the present by a life that is congruent with the judicial pronouncement that will be theirs in the future.

And, of course, the huge *irony* in all this, and I think possibly a third reason why Jesus spends some time emphasizing the role he will have in judgment is simply the fact that, at the moment, he is on the receiving end of a number of harsh judgments and rejections by people whom he himself will be passing judgment on at the end of time! Little do they know that the one they are dismissing *now* will himself dismiss them one day, and with far graver consequences.....

Well, our time is almost gone so let me shift gears for a moment so that we can think about some ways that these verses intersect with you and me as God's people today. As always, I will not exhaust the possible applications but will merely skim across the surface of a sea of possibilities.

For one thing, given the sorts of things Jesus says here about his relationship with God the Father, it is ludicrous for people to say things like, "I believe in God, I just don't believe in Jesus". It is ludicrous because this passage in particular and the New Testament in general do not give you that option. It is a package deal. You have to take both of them, or you cannot take either of them. To insist otherwise is to demonstrate a profound misunderstanding of the NT and of Jesus' own words about himself, including the words right here.

Likewise, the position that sees Jesus as merely a man, or as a prophet among many prophets, or other such things, is simply an un-tenable position. That portrait of Jesus is completely foreign to the New Testament and the only way to maintain it is to reject the Scriptures. But doing that leaves you with no basis for even knowing about Jesus so that, whatever Jesus one is talking about in that sort of scenario, it is a Jesus that is a complete and utter fiction, a Jesus conjured up out of thin air, and not the Jesus of the Bible.

But if you are taking the Bible seriously at all, then the Jesus you come up with is the one pictured here. One who is fully God and fully man, who is distinct, yet inseparable from God, submissive to his Father, but equal in power and authority. Practically speaking, then, this would be a great passage to show to someone who doubted Jesus' divinity or equality with God - for example, a Jehovah's Witness, or a Muslim.

It is a passage which pushes you to either embrace Jesus in the fullness of who He is or, if you will not do that, then at the very least you have to give up any ridiculous ideas about his being a great man or a great prophet or a great teacher and simply say that the Scriptures are false and therefore we cannot know anything about him. It's either, he is who he says he is, or we can't know anything about him. To attempt a middle position in order to avoid the extremes at either end is simply and intellectually dishonest.

Secondly, Jesus' words in verse 29 provide us with a reason to be reflective. The words which indicate that "*those who have done good*" go to the resurrection of life and "*those who have done evil*" to a resurrection of judgment - those are not to be taken as an indicator that people are ultimately saved by their works. John's Gospel makes it abundantly clear in many places that we are saved by the grace of God, and not by works.

But in our zeal to prove our theological orthodoxy by denying the role of works in our being made right with God we need to be careful that our denial of this role of good works does not become a *dismissal* of good works themselves. To be sure, good works cannot and will not save you or make you right with God, but they do *identify* you as one in whom the Spirit of God is present and working. You are not saved by them, but neither will you be saved without them.

And the absence of those things in this life, and the absence of the *desire* to honor God with one's life in these particular ways are in themselves a judgement as they indicate, in the present, the very realities that, in the future, will be looked back upon and recalled as the irrefutable evidence of a person's failure to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And vice versa. In short then, Christians ought to be concerned for and zealous for good works - rightly understood, rightly motivated, and rightly purposed.

One final point of application has to do with the Sabbath. Jesus was NOT violating the Sabbath when he was doing works of mercy and that out to be a clue to his people in every age as to how they ought to understand the Sabbath. To be sure, Jesus authority to do what he did on the Sabbath came from his identity as the Lord of the Sabbath - an identity which you and I do not share. But it is also true that the things that he DID on the Sabbath - the works of healing and mercy - those things were perfectly acceptable within a right understanding and treatment of the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment and would have, all by themselves, legitimized what he did.

How that translates to you and me is this: Whatever else the Sabbath might mean - it doesn't mean being *idle* and doing nothing, rather it is good and right and fitting that, in addition to gathering with God's people for worship, and in addition to seeking refreshment and renewal and appreciating and enjoying the blessings of God and his creation - in addition to these sorts of things it is *also* right and good that we expend ourselves engaging in works of mercy on the Sabbath. It is a perfect, even perhaps the *ideal* day upon which to do such things.

And so as families and as individuals you might think about what that might mean for you if you were to include this sort of thing as part of your own Sabbath observance. For some, that might mean that you spend an hour or two on Sunday afternoon visiting with a person who is sick or shut in - either in hospital or in an aged care facility, or an Alzheimer's Unit. It might mean that you take a couple hours to see if you might help a widow or widower who needs some assistance, or perhaps you incapacitated neighbor who could use a hand. It might mean that you visit with a prisoner or get involved in some sort of local ministry to the poor. It could mean a lot of things, it could take a lot of forms. But what a great way to invest yourselves as you partner with your heavenly Father and, in imitation of your Savior, and so participate in the Lord's ongoing, sustaining, providential watch-care of His creation.