

John 7:14-24

We are continuing this morning with our study of the Gospel of John, picking up at the 14th verse of chapter 7 and working through to the 24th verse of the same chapter. If you have a Bible you may want to turn there, otherwise we have the passage printed for you in the bulletin so that you can follow along.

As those of you who are regulars will know, we have been in John's Gospel for a number of months now and have tried to listen carefully as John has presented to us his very selective portrait of Jesus, one designed to encourage his readers, particularly his *Jewish* readers, to embrace Jesus as the Lord and Savior that he is.

Part of getting people to do that involves showing clearly both Jesus' *identity* and his *purpose*. More specifically with regard to his *purpose*, it involved showing how, in spite of his being the Messiah, Jesus managed to get himself killed and how, in fact, that was the centerpiece of the whole thing and was no accident or disgrace but was the main plan all along. The chapter we are currently in - chapter 7 - chronicles some of the historical circumstances behind Jesus' demise at the hands of the religious authorities in his day.

Now, before we go on to the passage itself there are a few preliminary comments I want to make which should help us to gain a better sense of at least some of what is going on in the verses before us this morning.

Firstly, it is helpful to keep in mind that - with regard to the "timeline" of Jesus' life - we are in the last 6-12 months of his earthly life. And over the course of the past two plus years Jesus' ministry has generated a pretty mixed response.

On the one hand, and as a consequence of his teaching and healing ministry, a growing number of people feel quite *positive* about Jesus - even if they don't all agree on who he is. At the same time, there have been more and more people who are *confused* about Jesus - who don't know what to think and who have been put off by the hard things he has said, and in fact many have turned away from him. And then there have been others who have grown to hate him more and more and intend to act on that hatred as soon as they are able - or, to be more precise, as soon as God decides it is "time" for them to be allowed to have their way. (See verses 30 and 44, and chapter 8, verses 20 and 59)

That's where we are. It's like what happens when you're boiling some water to make rice or pasta or something similar. And you look into the pan and the steam is rising off the water, and there are some tiny bubbles forming at the bottom of the pan, and occasionally one of them comes to the surface. It's not boiling yet. But it's close. That's where we are in Jesus' story.

Another thing that is important to keep in mind is that the last time Jesus was in town something very significant happened - he healed a paralyzed man - which in itself would be significant enough. But as important as that is, the thing about this particular healing that really got the attention of those that witnessed it was that *it happened on the Sabbath*.

Now, to you and me, that sort of thing might not seem to be that big of a deal. But it was a HUGE deal for the Israelite people in that day, and especially for the religious leaders. In their view, no godly person, and certainly no true prophet of God would choose to “work” in such a way and so “violate” the Sabbath. But Jesus did it anyway, knowing full well what he was doing and how it would be regarded. And so, ever since that day, the religious authorities have been stewing and simmering over this thing, waiting for the right time to do something about it.

Finally, one last thing I think we need to keep in mind is that the events described here are taking place during the time of the “Feast of Booths” - also called the “Feast of Tabernacles”. This was the largest and most well-attended of all the feasts. Consequently, the population of Jerusalem at the moment would be swollen to capacity. People were in the city from far and near, and from every city and village. Many of these people would likely have seen Jesus first-hand. Some of them would have never seen him, but would definitely have heard about him. And then there would be some who would have neither seen him, nor heard about him.

So, all kinds of people, with various levels of exposure to Jesus are in the city. This dynamic will show itself in the story as we see Jesus addressing the people around him - sometimes talking to the crowd as a whole (as in vs 20), but at other times clearly targeting a subset of the crowd (as in vs 15). We also see it from the other direction - in the differing responses of the crowd.

And so, with those preliminary comments in mind, let’s hear the passage together, and then we’ll pray before we dig in.....

(Read passage and pray)

Now as the passage opens, we see Jesus going up to the Temple *in the middle* of the festival. This is the same festival - as those of you who were here two weeks ago will recall - but this is the same festival that Jesus chose not to take part in - at least not in the way that his brothers had suggested, and not according to their very worldly agenda. What that meant was that, rather than being part of the pilgrimage into the city - which was part of the whole thing - Jesus chose to go up privately, on his own time, and in such a way as to not draw too much attention to himself.

Now this, when you think about it, was totally understandable. With his own grand entrance - his “triumphal entry” into the city not too terribly far away now, Jesus did not want to take the chance of going along with the rest of the crowds for this feast and festival, and then, in the heat of the religious zeal surrounding the occasion, find himself being paraded into the city as some sort of king. Indeed, the crowds had already tried to do this to him once before (6:15). But his time had not yet come and so, until it did, Jesus would have to exercise great selectivity in managing his public appearances. In so doing, he would have to walk a fine line between doing things publicly and doing things in a more guarded and private manner. After all, the supreme consideration for him was not self-preservation but rather, doing the will of his Father.

And so it was that while showing up at the Temple would have been an obviously public activity, apparently, it was not *so* public or fraught with such potentially undesirable consequences that it couldn't be done. As a result, we see Jesus here going up and teaching in the temple in Jerusalem. And the response to his teaching was what it typically was,

John 7:15 The Jews therefore marveled, saying, "How is it that this man has learning,¹ when he has never studied?"

The people there at the Jerusalem temple were amazed by the things that Jesus said and, even further, by the sheer *fact* of *his* having said them. Why? Because he was not - at least according to the educational practices of that day - an "educated" man. He was clearly intelligent - indeed he was pure genius. But he was not "schooled" as other teachers usually were. In other words, he hadn't gone and attached himself to some notable Rabbi or scholar and then followed him around for months and months soaking up his every word.

Now you might ask, how would the people know that Jesus had not been "schooled" as other speakers had? Simply because, in his teaching, he was not constantly referring to Rabbi *this*, and Rabbi *that*, who said *such and such*. That was the standard sort of thing done by those who *had* been schooled. And the reason they did that was because it was a demonstration of humility. It showed that a person wasn't just relying on themselves and functioning as some sort of lone ranger. It showed a respect for the learning of others. It showed that the person in question didn't think that they had cornered the market on all things knowable.

Now, of course, Jesus was ALSO concerned to demonstrate his humility as a teacher but rather than demonstrate that by referring to what half a dozen different Rabbis thought about some subject, he would refer, instead, to his Father in heaven, saying that he was acting on his Father's authority and that he was only doing and saying those things that the Father had given him to say and do.

Sadly, this genuine demonstration of humility on Jesus part was regarded as anything *but* that by many of those that heard him, especially by his enemies. And so, almost as if in anticipation of this, Jesus makes a remarkable statement in verse 17 that explains why some of the people who have heard him say these sorts of things will see it and receive it aright, and why others will simply not "get" what he is saying, and will reject it.

John 7:17-18 If anyone's will is to do God's¹ will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. ¹⁸ The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory, but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood.

Jesus tells them that his teaching originates with his Father in heaven, and then here explains that although some might question this claim, those who are prepared and are willing and desirous of doing the Father's will - people like that will recognize the origin of his teaching as being truly divine. They will "get" Jesus.

To say it another way, anyone who is truly wanting to do the will of God will have the discernment necessary for recognizing Jesus' teaching for what it truly is.

Now that's quite a statement, and indeed, a very significant statement with all sorts of implications for both Christians and non-Christians alike. In the interest of time, let me just tease out a couple of these for you....

First of all, for non-Christians, verse 17 poses something of a conundrum. Think about what's being said here. Verse 17 is saying that the necessary pre-requisite for recognizing Jesus' teaching as genuinely divine in origin, the necessary pre-requisite for *that* is that a person is *willing to do the will of God*.

_____ And at this point, some of you philosophers out there will be thinking, "Well that sounds pretty circular to me. If a person can't really "get" Jesus until he/she is truly willing to do God's will, then how do they ever get him in the first place because, in order to be willing to DO what God says, doesn't that imply some sort of understanding and recognition and submission on the part of the person in question?"

And the response to that is two-fold. First of all, yes, there IS a circularity here. But once you recognize that circularity is not necessarily a bad thing and, in fact, is ultimately a necessary and inescapable thing, then this fact ought not trouble you so much. Now I don't have time to give you the whole circularity rap but let me just recommend to you Richard Pratt's book, *Every Thought Captive*, and you will find a clear treatment of it there.

The second response is that, once you get past the idea that circularity is a deal-breaker, which it isn't, then you need to go back to some passages we have already seen - specifically 6:37, 6:44 and 6:65 and there you will see that the unbeliever's conundrum is addressed. While the unbeliever himself or herself cannot deliver themselves from their dilemma, *God can do what they cannot and indeed, apart from his intervention, would not do*. This is the significance of those verses in John chapter 6 which repeatedly make it clear that no one can come to the Father unless the Father draws them to himself.

Practically, what that means is that there are no *armchair conversions*. Coming to faith in Jesus Christ is not, nor will it ever be, merely the result of a person sitting down and weighing up the pros and cons, or charting out things on a white board somewhere, and then concluding that one ought to become a believer because it is the most rational of all choices to make. Why won't that happen? Because at some point in the proceedings, if the person is going to see the revelation of God in Jesus Christ for what it truly is, then there will have to be a change of heart. Stubborn resistance and independence will have to become broken-ness and a willingness to submit to the will of the Father. No one brings that sort of thing on themselves. Only God can bring that sort of thing about.

And so along with all of our presentations and explanations of the Gospel - which we ought to continue in - but alongside all of that there needs to be the persistent, fervent prayer for God to draw our unbelieving family and friends to Himself and to do so by creating within them a willing heart, that is responsive to the things of God, and so deliver them from this conundrum in which they are living.

For believers there are also some important and on-going implications that flow out of what Jesus says here. This connection between being *willing to do God's will* and the ability to *see and receive God's revelation of himself rightly* - that is a huge connection and the dynamic described there is an ongoing one. As Christians, we come to the Scriptures for all sorts of reasons, as we should, wanting to know what God says about all sorts of things, including: relationships, sexuality, money, work and career issues, priorities, etc.

And all of those things are important things, and they are all legitimate doorways into the Scriptures. But if we take Jesus' words in verse 17 seriously, then as important as questions about those things are, there is an even *more* important prior question that we need to ask ourselves before we get to these subjects, namely this: *Am I prepared to HEAR and DO what the Bible says when I come across it?* If not, then what is the point of reading the Scriptures at all? N T Wright summarizes this well. He says, and I'm paraphrasing here,

You can't come to Jesus with a list of things you DON'T want to hear him say to you or a list of things you are not prepared to accept - you can't come to him with a list like that and expect to really read him properly.

The person who comes to the Bible and is only prepared to accept those things which affirm certain things about his/her life already - that person is in no position to actually hear what the truth of the Bible says.

Practically, what this means is that the most important "step" in reading the Bible happens long before you actually pick the thing up. And that is the "step" of prayer, if I can be allowed to call prayer a "step". The most important interpretive "tool" in your tool box is to take the time, before you read the Scriptures, to talk to God and ask him to give you a heart that is ready and willing to do *all* his Holy will, whatever that might mean, come what may. If you attempt to discern God's will through His Word, *without that prior commitment*, you are setting yourself up to mishandle and misread the Scriptures.

And so, thus far in the passage we have seen, as one commentator puts it, that in response to the Jewish authorities' doubts about his credentials as a teacher, Jesus raises the question of their competence *as listeners*. They don't think Jesus ought to be teaching publicly because he hasn't been "schooled" properly. And he doesn't think they are in any position to pass out assessments of his teaching since they aren't prepared to do what God says anyway.

And in order to press this point home a bit more, Jesus goes on in verses 19 and following to apply the things he has just said to the religious leaders - the “Jews” of verse 15 - that were doubting his credentials,

***John 7:19-20** Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?" ²⁰ The crowd answered, "You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?"*

Jesus has just talked about the connection between being willing to do God’s will and being *able* to recognize the true origin of his teaching and authority. Now he confronts his detractors at this very point, making it clear that, although they have received the law of Moses, they are not actually keeping that law, in fact they are doing far worse than that. They are actively planning to break it in a flagrant way - they are plotting his MURDER and, as such, prove themselves to be the very sort of person that vs 17 talks about - a person who is *incapable* of rightly receiving Jesus for who he really is.

Not surprisingly, given the mixed nature of this crowd - as we saw in the introduction - some of the people before Jesus know nothing of the religious leaders’ plans to have Jesus killed. And of course Jesus knows that. But he also knows that out there among the faces are some who do know all about this plan and are in fact part of it! And so he says what he does with the predictable result that some among the crowd mistake his comments toward these religious leaders as comments toward them. And it is those who are in **this** position who respond, somewhat dramatically, with the suggestion that Jesus might have some sort of demon!

Well, Jesus clearly chooses not to respond to the crowds’ question because he has already made his point and now wants to move on to make an even more substantial one. Even though their own unwillingness to keep the law of Moses renders them unqualified to pass any judgment on Jesus’ own teaching and ministry, despite all of that, their complaint against Jesus makes no sense whatsoever - as demonstrated by their own practices,

***John 7:21-24** Jesus answered them, "I did one deed, and you all marvel at it. ²² Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. ²³ If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well? ²⁴ Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."*

The “one deed” that Jesus is referring to here is the Sabbath day healing that we’ve been talking about, and which is found in John 5. Jesus says that he did this one thing - and they all marveled at it - which likely has two senses. They marveled in that it was an amazing thing to see. But they also marveled in the sense of making a big fuss about it, treating it as if it is some big, horrible thing that he healed a man on the Sabbath.

Over against this reality, Jesus points out to them their own hypocrisy by highlighting the fact that they too will not allow the Sabbath prohibitions against “work” to stop them from performing the “work” of circumcision on that day. In light of that reality, Jesus’ challenge to them was to think of these things in terms of the lesser and the greater. If they deemed that it was proper to allow a person to receive a *wound* - i.e. a circumcision - that actually made them more whole, spiritually speaking, then why would it be considered *improper* for Jesus to perform a *healing* that accomplished the same thing - only on a much grander scale?

And the obvious response is - it wouldn’t be improper at all. And so Jesus calls them out on their hypocrisy and tells them to judge justly and rightly, and not on the basis of mere appearances and surface issues.

And notice, please, the *manner* of Jesus’ argument. Notice that in making his case for healing the man on the Sabbath, Jesus does not say “Forget the Sabbath” or “Who cares about the Sabbath?” or anything like that. He does not come across as “Anti-Sabbatarian” in any way, as one commentator puts it. The Sabbath was important to Jesus. And honoring the Sabbath was important to Jesus.

Another thing that Jesus does not do here is push for a more *liberal* interpretation of the Sabbath laws, trying to get people to lighten up on them, or push the envelope, or something like that. That isn’t what is going on here.

On the contrary, Jesus saw what he did as a *fulfillment* of what the Sabbath was all about - not as a dismissal of it, nor as a liberalizing of it in any way. Jesus saw the Sabbath - as it was originally given and intended. He saw the Sabbath in the light of its foundational context in the creation accounts, as the occasion when God rested from all his labors of creation and looked upon it all and it was good. It was *very* good.

And what was so good about the creation? Well, lots of things. But one of the things that was good about it was Adam and Eve - these two creatures of God’s own making, who are sinless and flawless, whole and complete. No sin, no sickness, no disease, no process of death and decay. Just perfect harmony - with God, with each other, and with the creation. The shalom - the peace - of God reigns throughout their life.

Jesus’ work of healing was a work that, relatively speaking, made a broken man whole. It was a work that restored something of the *shalom* - this peace that was lost when the world fell into sin. It was an act that made this man’s *own* ability to observe and appreciate the Sabbath rest of God that much better.

And so, seen in that light, not only ought it be considered *permissible* for Jesus to heal a man on the Sabbath - it ought to be regarded as entirely appropriate and even *ideal* that he healed this man on the Sabbath. Indeed, what better day than the Sabbath to engage in a work that restored something of the shalom and wholeness that the very first Sabbath was a celebration of?

_____ You and I, as his disciples, as the being-restored image bearers of God that we are, as the imitators of Christ that we are meant to be - but you and I have the opportunity through our own lives to participate in this very same sort of thing. We too have the opportunity and privilege of working - yes *working* - in some small way toward the restoration of that which was lost, and that which has been broken. You and I can be the ones that actively pursue the fulfillment of the commission Christ has given to his Church to tell others the good news of the Gospel. You and I have the opportunity to be living examples of the power of the Gospel for transformation and restoration and reconciliation - not only in ourselves and not *amongst* ourselves as a Christian community - although that is part of it - but also as we become *agents of these things* before and in the midst of a watching world.

And, to be sure, we can and should embrace this as a full time reality. Spreading the news of the Gospel and engaging in deeds of love and mercy are appropriate every day, even and ideally on *this* day, this Sabbath day. Shouldn't we enter into and celebrate the rest of God ourselves? Absolutely.

But it's not an either/or thing. We can both celebrate and appreciate it, and we can engage in the things that promote in others and in the world around us the very thing we are celebrating. We can engage in those things which make entering into and enjoying the rest of God more possible for others - and not just for ourselves. And in doing these things we are not in any way desecrating this thing that God has designed for the good of His people but are, in fact, addressing the broken-ness and fracture that came into the world because of sin, and which is an affront to the wholeness and shalom of God in this world.

Jesus is the one who came to speak and to do his Father's will and only those who share that same desire will recognize him for who he truly is. That should be our prayer for the world and for ourselves - for the world that they might embrace him, and for ourselves, that we might imitate him.