

TEACHING AT THE TEMPLE

John 7:14-24

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“Jesus answered them, ‘My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me’”
(Jn. 7:16).

John 7 begins with a record of Jesus’ secret appearance at the Feast of Tabernacles. But suddenly Jesus stepped forward into the most public of venues: “About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began teaching” (Jn. 7:14). Evidently, his earlier caution had been directed to enabling this bold stroke.

When we realize the connection between Jesus, the temple, and the Feast of Tabernacles, we see a great irony. In the exodus, God dwelt with his people at the tabernacle. Later, the temple was built as a permanent version of the tabernacle. But both merely represented the reality brought into the world in Jesus Christ: God’s presence with his people. This is why John’s prologue said of Jesus, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14). The verb for “dwelt” is *tabernacled* (*eskenosen*). The feast remembered the shelter that God’s presence gave his people, and Jesus was himself the true reality of God’s presence. How appropriate, then, that Jesus should come to the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles and teach God’s Word. But how tragic that the people rejected him and the religious leaders sought his life. The account of Jesus’ teaching at the temple reveals why the Jews did not receive Jesus, and also shows what is necessary if we are to realize our need to accept Jesus and his teaching.

AN IMPORTANT QUESTION

We are not told what Jesus taught on this occasion, but only the reaction of the religious leaders who heard him: “The Jews therefore marveled, saying, ‘How is it that this man has

learning, when he has never studied?” (Jn. 7:15).

To the scribes and Pharisees, it was unthinkable that a man who had not passed through their educational system should expound the Law. Yet Jesus not only dared to teach, but he did so in a way that forced them to admit, “This man has learning.” D. A. Carson writes, “They were astonished that someone who had not studied in one of the great rabbinical centers of learning, or with one of the famous rabbis, could have such a command of Scripture, such telling mastery in his exposition.”¹ Jesus was the mere son of a carpenter in the outlying district of Galilee. He hung no diploma on his wall and boasted no rabbinic letters of recommendation. What gave such a plain, simple man the ability to teach more ably than the priests and scribes?

Jesus’ answer was important in establishing his authority, as well as that of all true teachers who would follow him. First, he said, “My teaching is not mine” (Jn. 7:15). Jesus was not denying his divine status or knowledge of truth. After all, he is referred to in this very Gospel “the Word” (Jn. 1:1). His point was simply that his teaching was not based on personal experience, learning, or insight.

The rabbis, especially, based their teaching on their educational attainments. They were fond of quoting various opinions and disputing on matters in light of their particular school of thought. Likewise, many today preach out of their own experience – things that happened during the week, insights they have gained about life, events in their family, things they learned in school, or books they have recently read. They teach out of themselves. Such preaching will often be popular, but it is not the kind of teaching that Jesus modeled. “My teaching is not mine,” ought to be part of the motto for every preacher.

Jesus completed his answer, “My teaching is... his who sent me.” Jesus is referring to God the Father; he insists that his teaching is that of God, who sent him into the world. This, too, should form a motto for Christian preachers, that their message not only must not originate in themselves or in any other earthly source but from God himself. Only God has the credentials to speak on matters of life and death, heaven and hell, salvation and eternity. Therefore, our teaching

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 311.

should strictly consist of preaching what God has taught in his Word. The best preaching is not that which causes us to remark on the cleverness of the preacher but on the clarity of our understanding of the Bible.

We know that Jesus, as the divine Son, was in constant communion with the Father and understood the Word of God on his own. Nonetheless, we should observe how frequently his teaching involved the exposition of Scripture, doing what today is called “expository preaching”. When he began his ministry in the synagogue of Nazareth, he began with a reading from the prophet Isaiah (Lk. 4:16-21). His great “Bread of Life” sermon in John 6 involved the explanation of the Bible’s teaching on the manna that came through Moses. Even though Jesus could impress his hearers by performing miracles, he still rested the authority of his teaching on the truth of the Scriptures. It is important that we preach with authority today, and this can only come by presenting the truth of God’s Word. It is because of the authority of the Bible as God’s revealed Word that the Puritan Thomas Watson could say, “In every sermon preached, God calls to you; and to refuse the message we bring, is to refuse God himself.”²

One of the great moments in the history of the church was Martin Luther’s refusal to recant his teaching when confronted at the Diet of Worms (1521). In the presence of the Holy Roman Emperor, and with the threat of death lingering in the air, his accuser pointed to a pile of books Luther had written. The cardinal demanded that he recant his teaching, because they conflicted with Roman Catholic doctrine and criticized the pope. Luther replied:

Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of Scripture or by clear reason – since I believe neither the popes nor the councils by themselves, for it is clear that they have often erred and contradicted themselves – I am conquered by the holy Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God... Here I stand. God help me. Amen.³

Luther did not teach or take his stand based on his own credentials or insights, but on God’s plain teaching in the Bible. This established

² Thomas Watson: *A Body of Divinity* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), 221

³ Cited from N.R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power*, 3 vols. (London: Grace Publications, 2004), 3:98.

the great Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*: Scripture alone has authority over the faith and lives of God's people. This should be the conviction that guides all our teaching in the church. Jesus said, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me."

Surely we should say the same! Preaching on this text, Luther commented: "This is a necessary principle... In the ministry, where the divine Word is concerned, Christ's words, used here, must be followed, so that no one preaches any doctrine unless it is supported and buttressed by the certainty that his doctrine is not his own." Moreover, Luther insisted, "Every member of Christendom should be sure that the preachers, teachers, and pastors... know for a certainty that their message is not their own but the Word of God."⁴ We should not listen to a preacher because he is dynamic, or humorous, or packs in a large crowd. Rather, Christians should insist that ministers proclaim only the Word of God, and to such faithful teaching they are bound to obedience.

Does this mean that preachers should not attend seminary or study carefully the passage they are going to teach? Not at all, for the New Testament instructs preachers to prepare themselves to handle Scripture rightly (2 Tim. 3:15). They should read the Bible in its original languages and have engaged in thorough theological studies. Moreover, they should be called and ordained by the church. Jesus says he was "sent" to teach; even he was formally ordained into his Messianic office at the time of his baptism. Likewise, preachers should be called, trained, and ordained by the church. Yet it is not a seminary diploma or a certificate of ordination that gives authority to anyone's teaching. Legions of ordained seminary graduates propound all kinds of heresy and error. The preacher's authority comes from one place only: from the truth of the Word of God.

AN IMPORTANT PROMISE

People sometimes complain that almost anything can be taught from the Bible. That is not quite true, yet not everything taught from the Bible is in fact true. So how can we be sure of the truth? With this in mind, Jesus made a great promise: "If anyone's will is to

⁴ Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 6-8*, Luther's Works, v. 23 (St. Louis: CPH, 1957), 225.

do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority" (Jn. 7:17).

According to Jesus, the key to recognizing God's truth is not found in a book or taught in a seminary. It is found in our hearts. He says that those who seek to do God's will will know God's truth when the Word is preached.

Notice that all through the Gospels there are two kinds of people. There are those who sit quietly at Jesus' feet to learn. Then there are those like these religious leaders who stand before him arguing. I find it important to emphasize this whenever I am teaching difficult truths from the Bible. Whether the subject is God's sovereignty, the Trinity, the biblical roles of men and women, or practically any other disputed matter, the most important issue is whether or not we are willing to submit ourselves to God's Word. Are you sitting quietly at Christ's feet or are you arguing with the Bible? Over and again, this is what determines whether we are able to discern and receive what God has taught. Proverbs 3:5 says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding."

Augustine was one of the most brilliant minds ever, but he established a rule that whenever he found that he disagreed with the Bible he concluded that he was the one who was wrong and he submitted to the teaching of God's Word. This is what it means to "will to do God's will" – that we are willing to believe and obey what the Bible teaches, even when – indeed, especially when – it requires a revision in our thinking and actions.

This may be a needed rebuke to many who struggle to accept the Bible. Our first question must always be to determine what Scripture really says. Then we must humble ourselves to receive and believe it because it is God's Word. Only then may we enter safely into questions of understanding or apparent contradictions, and God will lead us deeper into truth.

I especially want to offer this as a wonderful promise to those who are just beginning as believers. You have much to learn and may be struggling with the Bible's challenge to your thinking. Perhaps you doubt you will ever attain a sound understanding of Scripture. But do not doubt! Determine that you are willing to embrace the will and the

truth of God as it is revealed in the Bible, and you can be certain that you will know what is taught by God. Jesus states this promise: “If anyone’s will is to do God’s will, he will know whether the teaching is from God” (Jn. 7:17). F. F. Bruce explains, “If there be a readiness to *do* the will of God, the capacity for discerning God’s message will follow.”⁵ Once we realize that we are not schoolmasters but pupils, we have placed ourselves in the right place to be taught by God through his Word.

This explains why Jesus’ hearers did not receive him in faith. It wasn’t because of defects in him or his teaching. They simply were not willing to be taught by God’s Word. Joel Nederhood rightly applies this problem to all unbelievers:

Those who trust in Christ and are trying to do his will should realize that the people around them who reject Christ are doing so because they have not chosen to do God’s will. Those who choose their own will or the will of others who oppose Christ, will simply not be able to recognize the truth the Christ has come to bring.⁶

Is this the cause of your unbelief or of your lack of growth in faith and godliness? Then realize that either the Bible is God’s holy Word or it possesses no authority at all. Examine the many proofs of the Bible’s divine authorship and read it with a prayer that God will show you the truth of his Word. And when you have come to this conviction, determine to do the will of God. As you understand the Bible’s teaching, determine to believe and put it into practice. Jesus’ hearers resented his rebukes; they were not willing to be corrected by God’s Word. This is why they rejected him who is the true Tabernacle. The same can happen to us; Nederhood comments: “If we drift away from the way he wants us to live, we will find that his voice grows ever fainter. Other voices intrude. But as we, who have Christ’s Spirit, live in obedience to him, we find our lives enriched immeasurably as Christ’s teaching takes deeper root in our hearts.”⁷

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 175-176.

⁶ Joel Nederhood, *The Forever People* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 111.

⁷ *Ibid.*

AN IMPORTANT PRINCIPLE

Jesus followed this promise with an important principle that also explained the unbelief of his hearers. He added, “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” (Jn. 7:18). Just as we must commit to doing God’s will, those who would be true must place God’s glory first in all things.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism famously begins, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” This is what it means that we were made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26), that his glory should be reflected in our lives and in our worship. It is especially true that our salvation has God’s glory as its chief end. We derive many benefits from Jesus Christ, but chief among them is the privilege that our salvation should bring eternal glory to God. Realizing this, our lives should be directed to God’s glory. Jesus taught, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 5:16). Now Jesus says that such a person will be true and have no falsehood.

This, too, is an important principle for ministers. J. C. Ryle said, “A self-exalting spirit in ministers of religion is entirely opposed to the mind of Christ.”⁸ Moreover, by seeking God’s glory in our preaching and ministry we safeguard our hearts from sin and error. Ministers must not preach out of a desire for praise and approval. A woman once extolled Charles Spurgeon after a service, saying, “You are the finest preacher there ever was!” Spurgeon replied, “I know that, Madame, because Satan whispered it in my ear as soon as I stepped out of the pulpit!” There is nothing wrong with showing appreciation to a preacher, but the ministry of the pulpit must be devoted to the glory of God alone.

Preachers are not the only ones who must seek the glory of God. Humility before God is a key to learning God’s Word. The humble heart is a learning heart; it is open to being taught by God.

⁸ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:16.

This provides another reason that Jesus' hearers could not believe. Jesus gave a small test: "Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?" (Jn. 7:19). The malice of their reply exposed their hearts as false. "The crowd answered, 'You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?'" (Jn. 7:20). John has already informed us, of course, that the plot to harm Jesus was common knowledge in the city (cf. Jn. 7:13). Their unwillingness to accept reproof— either from Jesus or from the law — for what everyone knew was true exposes the false pride in their hearts. All of us will often be rebuked by God's Word; rather than resenting this, let us be quick to confess our faults, repent, and seek God's glory. In this way, we will be found true. But if we proudly reject correction from God's Word we simply prove that our hearts are false.

AN IMPORTANT OBLIGATION

We are considering the reasons why this crowd failed to see the truth about Jesus, even as he taught from the temple in the midst of a feast that was given in order to teach about him. They were not willing to obey God's will and they did not seek God's glory. What could provide greater proof of their false hearts than their blasphemous claim that Jesus was demon-possessed! But, as Jesus continued, we see another reason for their unbelief: their inability to exercise right judgment.

To make this point, Jesus reminded them why their leaders were seeking his life: "I did one deed, and you all marvel at it" (Jn. 7:21). This refers to his healing on the Sabbath about a year earlier (John 5). Not understanding God's Word and operating with false hearts they exercised wrong judgment about the meaning of the Sabbath.

Jesus explained: "Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. 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?" (Jn. 7:22-23). This serves as a case study for the false judgment rendered by false hearts, which do not seek to do God's will.

God's Fourth Commandment ordered that his people rest from their work on the seventh day (Ex. 20:8-10). But, Jesus pointed out, this did not keep them from circumcising a baby boy when the eighth day fell on a Sabbath. This was right, but the precedent made it all the more irrational for them to condemn Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. If a baby's flesh may be cut away on the Sabbath, then surely a grown man may have his whole body healed without violating the law.

This makes an important point for us about the Sabbath and also about making spiritual judgments. First, we, too, want to avoid a false legalism when it comes to the Lord's Day. The Pharisees judged Jesus for healing on the Sabbath because they took pride in their regulations and cared little for the healing of a paralytic. But the whole point of the Sabbath was to foster the well being of God's people. Leon Morris points out that Jesus "was not adopting an anti-sabbatarian attitude, opposing the whole institution. He pointed out that his action fulfilled the purpose of the original institution."⁹ Both circumcision and the healing were expressions of God's redemptive work, of which the Sabbath is a symbol. The same is true for works of mercy and salvation that are performed on the Lord's Day today.

If we want to honor God and do his will, then we also have an obligation to learn how to judge rightly. Jesus said, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment" (Jn. 7:24). This means that we need to understand God's spiritual purposes for those things he has ordained. As we are taught by God's Word, we must come to make right judgments about all kinds of matters. A good place to start is with Jesus' summary of God's law in the two great commandments – loving God and loving others. These two commands should guide our judgment of all things. Take questions about what we should do on the Lord's Day. We should ask: "Does this promote the worship of God? Or are we just going along with the world in ignoring God's holy day? Does this help us to see and enjoy God's redemptive work? Does this express God's love to other people? Or are we just serving our own desires? Jesus' healing fulfilled God's purpose for the Sabbath. We likewise need to understand God's purposes for all things and, through the humble

⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised), New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 362.

seeking of God's will in the Bible we will come to discern rightly about all manner of subjects: not seeing mere appearance but perceiving their spiritual reality. This is an obligation that Jesus lays on us; we must apply ourselves diligently to the task.

AN IMPORTANT REALIZATION

Jesus' teaching both confronted and explained the hostility of his hearers. They were not seeking to do God's will, so they could not recognize sound teaching. They did not seek God's glory but their own, so their hearts were false. Judging by worldly appearances, they discerned matters wrongly. Let us seek to avoid these mistakes, but rather commit ourselves to doing God's will, seeking his glory in all things, and learning to judge rightly according to the Bible.

If we do these things, we will come to exactly the opposite conclusion from the one Jesus' hearers at the Feast of Tabernacles reached. They concluded that they had no use for Jesus. But if we seek to do God's will, we will soon realize how great is our need for the forgiveness only Jesus can give and for the strength he promises to those who believe. If we seek God's glory, we will humbly adore Jesus Christ; instead of blaspheming, "You have a demon!" we will say with Peter, "You have the words of eternal life..., you are the Holy One of God" (Jn. 6:68-69). And of all the things that we judge rightly, the first will be our own great need to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and find our salvation through his death on the cross for our sins.