

SERIES: Gospel of John: Seeing is Believing?
 SERMON: *A Matter of Life and Death*
 SCRIPTURE: John 5:1-30
 SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black
 DATE: October 30, 2011

John 5:1–15 (ESV)

After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ²Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. ³In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?” ⁷The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.” ⁸Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” ⁹And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.

Now that day was the Sabbath. ¹⁰So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.” ¹¹But he answered them, “The man who healed me, that man said to me, ‘Take up your bed, and walk.’” ¹²They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and walk’?” ¹³Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. ¹⁴Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.” ¹⁵The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him.

The Problem of Authority

I'd like to begin this morning with a little bit of church history. Tomorrow is October 31st. This is the date on your calendars when Americans celebrate Halloween. Long before October 31st was known as Halloween it was known as All Hallows Eve; the night before All Saints [the hallowed ones] Day. But for Evangelicals, October 31st brings to mind the Reformation, for it was on All Hallows Eve, October 31, 1517 that Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the Wittenberg door. This was a key event in the birth of the Reformation.

Out of the Reformation came some core beliefs that continue to define Evangelicalism even today:

- *Sola Gratia* – We are saved by grace alone
- *Sola Fide* – We are saved by faith alone
- *Sola Christos* – We are saved through Christ alone
- *Sola Dei Gloria* - Glory be to God alone
- *Sola Scriptura* – by Scripture alone

What this last “Sola” means is that Scripture alone is our authority in the church. John Stott has put it this way; “*Scripture is the scepter by which Christ rules the church.*”¹

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) has a different view than this. The RCC says that Christ rules his Church by *both* Scripture and the Church’s teaching on Scripture. In other words the Bible says what God says, but so does the Church. Tradition also has authority. Tradition is the authoritative interpretation of the Bible by the Church throughout history. So in a sense, the Church sits in judgment over the Bible.²

The Reformers’ view stands in opposition to the RCC’s view. Luther said the problem with Tradition is that Tradition was known to err. And so the Reformation position is that Christ rules his Church by Scripture *alone*. God’s Word commands belief and action; God’s Word sits in judgment over the Church and its teachings, not the other way around.

Now while there *has* been debate in the Church over *the way* God exercises his authority through Christ, there has been no question that God is the ultimate authority over the Church and there is no question that God has given that ultimate authority over to Christ (Mt. 28:18; Col. 1:18). However, there is a more foundational issue at hand today.

God in the Dock

Today there is not even a shared assumption that God is the ultimate authority and judge. C.S. Lewis frames the issue well in his essay “God in the Dock.” “*The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He [man] is the judge: God is in the dock.*”³ In other words, modern man puts God on trial and sits in judgment over God. This is a big shift and a big deal. But why is the issue of authority so important?

Let me try to illustrate why authority in general is such an important issue. Most of you here today have parents who raised you or are raising you now, and many of you are parents. I also suspect that most of you went to school at some point or are going to school currently. So, based off of your extensive experience, do you agree that in the home and in the school there is sometimes a question of who’s in charge? It starts with questions like this; “WHY!?” Many have come to believe that the traditional answer of “because I said so,” or “because I’m your father,” are insufficient answers to this question. I’m not here to debate that point. I’m here to say that failure to answer the question of who’s in charge causes many problems in the home and in the classroom. And I would also say that the sooner you establish the answer to question the easier your life will be.

The best homes and the best classrooms are run by parents and teachers who have lovingly, but firmly, established the fact that they are in charge. They have established who gets to decide what is acceptable behavior and what is unacceptable behavior. This is the best environment for children to grow in. The worst homes and classrooms are run by parents and teachers who have failed to answer the question of who’s in charge.

¹ John Stott. “Affirming Scripture’s Authority.”

² J.I. Packer. *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, 49.

³ C.S. Lewis. *The Collected Works of C.S. Lewis: [Three Bestselling Works Complete in One Volume]*.

If the issue of authority is such a big deal in the family and in the school, then how much more important is it when it comes to man's relationship to God? The stakes are much higher in our relationship with God. The way we answer the question, "Who has the right to command belief and/or action,"⁴ is of eternal significance. It's a matter of life and death, as the title to this sermon indicates.

How does all of this apply to our passage this morning in John 5? In our text this morning, we encounter another problem of authority. The Jewish leaders have a problem with Jesus' authority.

Healing on the Sabbath (5:1-18)

Pastor Dick read John 5:1-15 earlier. In that passage we see Jesus heal an invalid of 38 years. But, Jesus heals the man on the Sabbath (v. 9), which the Jewish leaders view as unlawful. In verse 16 the tension in the narrative becomes clear. *"And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath."*

Now keep in mind the Old Testament Law neither prohibits a man from carrying his bed on the Sabbath (v. 10) nor from healing on the Sabbath (v. 16); however, the Tradition did. The Tradition (the official teaching of the Jews which interpreted the Law) listed 39 things you couldn't do on the Sabbath, and carrying your bed was one of them.⁵ Jesus could have opened his "Bible" and showed these Jewish leaders a thing or two about the Law. But he doesn't appeal to the authority of the Scriptures here (cf. vv. 39-47). Instead Jesus ups the ante.

Look at his response to the Jewish leaders in verse 17. *"But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working."* Whoa! This verse is the climax of the chapter. What follows is explanation on this verse.

Observing the Sabbath was commanded in the Law (Ex 20:10), but the principle of Sabbath went all the way back to creation (Gen 2:1-3).

Genesis 1:2-3 (ESV)

And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. ³So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

God rested from his work on the seventh day and that was the basis of the command to observe the Sabbath. But all Jews agreed that God continues to work following creation; he upholds the universe and is sovereign over all of creation and history. So when Jesus says in verse 17, *"... 'My Father is working until now, and I am working,'"* he is going beyond how one interprets the Sabbath laws; he is saying that he is God. He is saying he has authority over the Sabbath, because he is the Lord of the Sabbath. He has upped the ante in the conversation. And that is why the Jewish leaders react the way they do. Verse 18 says, *"This is why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God."*

⁴ Millard J. Erickson. *Christian Theology*.

⁵ Mike Bullmore. "Two Great 'Offenses', One Sovereign Lord."

Modern man questions the authority of God because of skepticism – they put God in the dock. The Jewish leaders question the authority of Jesus for a very different reason. They do so because of their *zeal* for God and his Law. Jews are monotheists; they believe there is only one God (Deut. 6:4). Christians are also monotheists. But we believe the one God exists in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But the Jews had no categories for one God in three persons. So, Jesus’ statement was blatant blasphemy for a devout Jew. And so they put Jesus in the dock; they put him on trial. And as we will see this trial ultimately leads to Jesus’ death.

But there is deep irony in their actions and attitudes. The Jewish leaders view themselves as the authoritative word on the Law of God, but the man they have on trial for breaking the Law is the author of the Law. And the man they see as guilty of blaspheming God is in fact God. Throughout the book of John, the Jewish leaders sit in judgment of Jesus, failing to see that the man they have put in the dock is their ultimate Judge. Let’s read Jesus’ powerful testimony concerning himself in verses 19-30.

John 5:19–30 (ESV)

So Jesus said to [answered] them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.²⁰ For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel.²¹ For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.²² The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son,²³ that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

²⁵*“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.²⁷ And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.²⁸ Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice²⁹ and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.*

³⁰*“I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.*

In case you didn’t catch it on your own as this passage was read, let me say, we’re in the deep end of the swimming pool at this point, friends.⁶ There is a lot of theology in this passage that we need to wade through to understand the significance of Jesus’ words. I know you’re up for the task. And I promise this theology has relevance for your life, otherwise it wouldn’t be in the Bible. Please allow me an attempt to summarize these verses for you.

Sermon in a sentence: As the Son of God, Jesus has authority over life and death; the only appropriate response is to believe the gospel.

⁶ Mike Bullmore. “Two Great ‘Offenses’, One Sovereign Lord.”

Organization: I'd like to organize the rest of our time this morning by unpacking this sentence. We'll divide it into three parts.

JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD. (19-20)

Look again at verse 19. "...*the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.*" Jesus calls himself the Son throughout this passage and he describes himself as being equal with God his Father.

Jesus is equal with the Father.

So, the Jewish leaders' accusation of Jesus is in fact true (v. 18); he made himself equal with God. The Father works on the Sabbath, so the Son works on the Sabbath. The Father is involved in healing people, so the Son is involved in healing people. That is why in verse 17 Jesus says, "... *My Father is working until now, and I am working.*" In other words Jesus is saying to the Jewish leaders, "We have a family business here. I do what the Father does."⁷

This shouldn't surprise us. Remember in chapter 1, we are told that "*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*" (v. 1). Jesus is not a God; he is the one eternal God. John 10:30 is one of the most clear statement to this fact. "*I and the Father are one.*" Jesus' authority is therefore based on the fact that he is God.

The Son is united with the Father.

The Father and the Son are equal in status and united in purpose and action.⁸ While there is no human analogy to make this point, Mike Bullmore has suggested we imagine the best moments in pairs skating you have ever witnessed in the winter Olympics. That will be hard for me because I don't watch pairs skating and I'm sure none of the other men in this room do either. But if we did, we would see that there are certain moments in pairs skating when the two skaters seem like they are in perfect unison. And when that happens, it is amazing. Now take that picture of seemingly perfect unison in pairs skating and transfer it to the eternal and perfect relationship between the Father and the Son. It is not a perfect analogy, but maybe it helps. The Father and Son operate in perfect unison in all their work. But while Jesus is equal to the Father in status and unified with the Father in purpose and in action, Jesus is also distinct from the Father; they are two different persons.

Jesus is distinct from the Father.

One reason we know the Son is distinct from the Father is due to the relationship that exists between the Father and the Son. Notice in verse 20 "...*the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.*" There is a relationship of love between the Father and the Son. Love is personal. And in order to have a loving personal relationship with someone there has to be more than one person involved; there has to be a distinction of persons in the Godhead to have a loving relationship.

⁷ Köstenberger and Swain. *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel*, 116.

⁸ Mike Bullmore. "Two Great 'Offenses', One Sovereign Lord."

The other reason we know that Jesus is distinct from the Father is he has a different role than the Father in the work God does in creation and in redemption. God the Father is the *author* of creation. God the Son is the *agent* in creation; “*all things were made through him*” (1:3). In redemption, the Father is the *sender* and the Son is the *sent* one (v. 24). There is no difference in status between the Father and the Son; they are equal, but there is a distinction in the role they play.

The Father shows the Son his work and the Son is obedient to the Father to complete that work. It is actually the obedience of Jesus that ultimately shows us that he is the Son of God. Notice in the second half of verse 20 Jesus says, “*And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel.*” These greater works I believe include his death and resurrection,⁹ where the greatest work of God was carried out in perfect obedience. It was in that perfect obedience that we really understand that Jesus is the Son of God.

And that brings us to the critical next phrase in the summary sentence. As the Son of God, Jesus has authority over life and death.

JESUS HAS AUTHORITY OVER LIFE AND DEATH. (21-22, 25-29)

Our passage gives us two specific roles the Son of God has as the Father’s agent. One of the roles given to the Son by the Father is that of giving eternal life right now. Look at verse 21. “*For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.*” Look also at verse 26. “*For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.*”

But not only does Jesus have the authority to provide eternal life right now, he also has the authority to judge on the last day. Look at verse 22. “*The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son...*” And look also at verse 27-29. “*And he has given him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming [judgment day] when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.*”

So Jesus has authority to give eternal life and the authority to judge; he has authority over life and death. But how does all of this teaching relate to the healing of the invalid at the pool and the conflict with the Jews?

Remember the original question of the Jewish leaders was whether or not Jesus had the authority to heal on the Sabbath. We’ve established the fact that Jesus has the authority to heal and that he can work on the Sabbath without breaking the Law because he is the Son of God.

Also remember in verse 6 when Jesus said to the man, “*Do you want to be healed?*” It seems like a stupid question. The answer to the question seems obvious. Of course this man wants to be healed. But maybe Jesus isn’t even asking the obvious question in verse 6. Could it be another one of those statements in the book of John which is more meaningful than you thought

⁹ Obviously they include the authority he executes as well.

it was at first glance?¹⁰ Like the statement Jesus made to the woman at the well and the official in chapter 4. Is there a more significant sickness that this man needs healed from that only Jesus has the authority to heal? Could it be that this man is dead in his sins and in need of eternal life? Jesus has the authority to give eternal life.

Remember in verse 14 when Jesus came back to the man and said, “*See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.*” This verse is explicit in telling us that this man was a sinner, but this too seems like a bizarre comment. What is the something worse that Jesus is referring to? Could it be that it is referring to the judgment? Jesus has authority to heal this man, but he has authority over so much more. He has authority to judge him on the last day. He has authority over life and death.

So how does it strike you that Jesus is the Son of God who has authority over life and death? John 3:16 tells us that “*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...*” The truth that God loves you is not generally offensive. But the fact that Jesus is a Judge, who says things to people like “*Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you,*” tends to be offensive to a lot of people.

It’s offensive for a couple of reasons. First of all, people don’t generally like to think of God as a judge, at least not as a judge for “good” people like them and good people like Gandhi, etc. It is fine for God to be a judge for “bad” people like Hitler, but not for them. And that brings me to the second reason the thought of God being a judge can be offensive: people don’t like to hear that they are sinners who are dead in sin and in need of eternal life. Like I said, we like to think of ourselves as being pretty “good” people, at least compared to others we know.¹¹

But the book of John teaches us that we’re all sinners, dead in our sin. Even really moral people like Nicodemus are dead in their sins. Now some of you may be thinking, “Didn’t verse 29 just say some do good and some do evil?” The answer is “yes” and “no”. Some do good and some do evil, but the only way we can do good is if God has given us eternal life.

Turn back in your Bibles to John 3:19-21. Remember these verses come on the heels of a discussion about one of the most religious Jews in Israel needing to be born again, needing eternal life. “*And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.* [This seems to be describing everyone.]²⁰ *For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.* ²¹*But whoever does what is true comes to the light,* [Why do they come to the light? Is it because they’re good people who do good things on their own? No! They come to the light] *so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.*” According to John, the only good works that are pleasing to God are a result of God’s work in that person’s life. It’s a result of a person being born again; it’s a result of being given the gift of eternal life, which only Jesus can give.

So do you see why the issue of authority is so important? Now, if you don’t believe the Bible is God’s authoritative Word then I guess everything I’m saying is a waste of your time. But if we take the Bible as God’s authoritative Word then we must believe that Jesus is the Son of God

¹⁰ Mike Bullmore. “Two Great ‘Offenses’, One Sovereign Lord.”

¹¹ White Horse Inn. “Wisdom for Life and the Cross of Christ.”

who has authority over life and death. And if we believe the Bible is God's authoritative Word then we must believe that we are inherently sinful and will all face Jesus as our Judge if we have not been given the gift of eternal life. This is not popular truth, but this is God's authoritative truth. So, how should we respond to these life and death truths?

WE SHOULD BELIEVE THAT JESUS THE SON OF GOD. (24)

Look at verse 24. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”*

It's amazing to me that while Jesus made a very narrow claim (He alone has the authority to give eternal life), this offer of eternal life is infinitely open to all.¹² *“Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”* Whoever! People like Nicodemus, people like the woman at the well, people like the official whose son was sick, people like you, and people like me.

The other thing that is amazing to me is that this gift of eternal life is available now and can begin now; we don't have to wait. Look again at verse 25. *“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming [speaking of the judgment day], and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.”* On the last day *all* will hear his voice, we won't be able to plug our ears anymore (v. 28). But we don't have to wait until that last day to hear his voice. If we hear his voice now and believe, we will have eternal life now. If we wait until the last day, we will only hear his voice of judgment (v. 29).

Remember the purpose of John is for us to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. John 5 is one of the most important chapters in shaping our understanding of who Jesus is as *the Son of God* and calling us to believe in him as such.

As your pastor, I have two main prayers for us as a congregation as our understanding of Jesus as the Son of God grows. First, I pray that as our understanding grows, our faith in Jesus would grow and that we would have greater confidence in our Savior, who has given life to whoever believes. Secondly, I pray that as our understanding of Jesus as the Son of God grows, we would worship him as the Son of God.

To help you understand this second prayer I want to draw your attention to one of my favorite observations in the book of John. As the book of John moves on from chapter to chapter there is a growing sense of whom Jesus is. But at the same time there is a growing opposition by the religious leaders. And as these two strands rise, they eventually collide on a bloody Roman cross. And it is at this collision where we see most clearly who Jesus is as the Son of God. For this is where we see the perfect obedience of the Son of God to his Father. This is summarized well in Philippians 2:6-8.

Philippians 2:6-8 (ESV) *“...though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing...he humbled himself by being obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*

¹² Kent Hughes. “The Claims of Christ.”

And what should the response be to this humble obedience? Paul continues.

Philippians 2:9-11 (ESV) *“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

We should bow our knee in submission and worship. The death and resurrection of Jesus are part of the greater works the Father showed Jesus. And it was by these greater works that Jesus is able to provide eternal life to sinners. This is good news, this is the gospel. And what should our response be to these greater works? Verse 20 tells us that we should *marvel*; those who believe should worship. There is nowhere that the glory of God is seen more clearly than on the cross. The purpose of Jesus’ works and the purpose for all of humanity is to worship Christ as the Son of God.

One day every knee will bow. We will all know him and hear his voice. The question is whether we will know him as the authoritative life-giver or as authoritative judgment-giver.¹³ *“Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”*

As the Son of God, Jesus has authority over life and death; the only appropriate response is to believe the gospel.

A Prayer from John Piper:

“Eternal Father, you never had a beginning. You will never have an ending. You are the Alpha and the Omega. This we believe, because you have revealed it to us. Our hearts leap up with gratitude that you have opened our eyes to see and know that Jesus Christ is your eternal, divine Son, begotten, not made, and that you, O Father, and he, your Son, are one God. We tremble even to take such glorious truths on our lips for fear of dishonoring you with withering and inadequate words. But we must speak, because we must praise you. Silence would shame us, and the rocks themselves would cry out. You must be praised for who you are in the world you have made. And we must thank you because you have made us taste and see the glory of Jesus Christ, your Son. Oh, to know him! Father, we long to know him. Banish from our minds low thoughts of Christ. Saturate our souls with the Spirit of Christ and all his greatness. Enlarge our capacities to be satisfied in all that you are for us in him. Where flesh and blood are impotent, reveal to us the Christ, and rivet our attention and our affections on the truth and beauty of your all-glorious Son. And grant that whether rich or poor, sick or sound, we might be transformed by him and become an echo of his excellence in the world. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.”¹⁴

Benediction:

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 (ESV)

¹³ Mike Bullmore. “Two Great ‘Offenses’, One Sovereign Lord.”

¹⁴ John Piper. *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in ever good work and word.

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