

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL MIXTURE

(John 7:11-31)

2.20.22

INTRODUCTION

Our story today is a continuance of what we talked about last week. If you remember, it was the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, so sometime in the fall of the year. As with all the major festivals, the celebration of this feast centered around Jerusalem. As the time for this observance approached, Christ's brothers tried to goad Him into going to Jerusalem; as they said: *"Leave Galilee and go to Judea, so that Your disciples there may see the works You do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since You are doing these things, show Yourself to the world"* — John 7:3-4. But if it was not in His Father's timing, Christ had no interest, so He declined the opportunity. And we also can't forget that, as John had previously pointed out: *[Jesus] did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill Him* — John 7:1b. But once the Festival was in full swing, He obediently did make His way to Jerusalem. And that's where we pick up the story today. But first, **let's pause for a moment of prayer.**

TEXT

Now at the festival the Jewish leaders were watching for Jesus and asking, "Where is He?" Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about Him. Some said, "He is a good man." Others replied, "No, He deceives the people." But no one would say anything publicly about Him for fear of the leaders — John 7:11-13.

We are going to have a number of groups of people all playing featured roles in this story. The first group we see are the Jewish leaders, sometimes simply referred to as "the Jews." This would have included Pharisees, chief priests (mostly from the Sadducees) and the scribes. These guys would have made up the religious leadership that we have often referred to. Now in normal times none of these guys would have ever been accused of being "best buds," but these were far from normal times. The usual collective animosity they had for each other had been set aside due to the much larger threat that this Radical Rabbi, this Jesus of Nazareth, posed for them. They saw Him not only as a threat to their sacred positions in life (numerous perks included) but, particularly if the common people got sufficiently stirred up, also as a threat to the nation, as Rome might see enough of a concern of rebellion to want to enforce their rule even tighter. As a result, what started out as jealousy for Christ's popularity with the people plus the flat-out fear of being unable to compete with the so-called miracles had crystallized into a stone-cold hate, complete with an unabashed willingness to do whatever was necessary to get rid of this guy — even if that meant killing Him.

The second group we find in this story is simply the people. Now these would have mostly been those who lived away from Jerusalem but who were in town for the Festival. Because they lived apart from Jerusalem, they were also less impacted by the influence of the Pharisees and their allies, making them less likely to be impressed by whatever the leadership was doing or saying.

The third group would have been the people who actually lived in Jerusalem year-round. They would have been much more under the sway of the religious leaders.

Now notice that, before Jesus even makes His presence known at the Festival, the leaders got their eyes open for Him, going all over the place asking, “Where is He? Have you seen Him?” Their designs for Christ were so strong in their hearts that they didn’t even bother hiding their intentions. They just wanted to get their hands on Him. And they were threatening enough to the crowds gathered for the Festival that nobody wanted to say anything at all about Christ — good or bad. They wanted nothing to do with anyone or anything that could get them in trouble with the guys with the fancy robes. The Greek word for the fear the people felt toward their religious leaders is the word from which we get our word “phobia.” They literally were in terror of the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees, which is a horrific commentary on the quality of religious leadership those leaders were providing the people.

Now while the leadership is their “search and destroy” mission, Jesus is already the “talk of the town.” And you get a sense of just how divisive He is in those first couple of verses: Some see Him as a good man, and others are sure He is a fraud. Now He had to be one or the other but, if He was truly a “good man,” then He couldn’t also be a fraud. So, more to the point, either He was exactly who He said He was, exactly who He was presenting Himself to be, or He was a liar — no other options.

Not until halfway through the festival did Jesus go up to the temple courts and begin to teach. The Jews there were amazed and asked, “How did this man get such learning without having been taught?” Jesus answered, “My teaching is not My own. It comes from the One who sent Me. Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether My teaching comes from God or whether I speak on My own. Whoever speaks on their own does so to gain personal glory, but He who seeks the glory of the one who sent Him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about Him” — John 7:14-18.

Finally, some three or four days into the Festival, Jesus goes public with His presence, showing up at the temple courts and beginning to teach there. Now, if your desire is to “fly under the radar” so to speak in terms of being noticed, the temple courts were absolutely NOT the place to go. The temple was the center of everything going on in Jerusalem, especially during any kind of special event like the Festival of Tabernacles. But nevertheless, that’s where Jesus came out in the open — and not just hanging out there but teaching as well.

And it was the teaching that initially got the attention. “Where did this guy get this stuff?” the crowds asked. The Greek tells us that they were in wonder, in astonishment, at His teachings. The Greek also reminds us that Jesus appeared to have, at least from their point of view, “no learning in letters”; in other words, He had come from no rabbinic tradition which they recognized. Here was the problem: Christ’s words were so profound and so unassailable that no one could argue them. So, if they couldn’t attack His words, they tried attacking His credentials. “No one taught this guy, right? He doesn’t come from any of our rabbis.” In that much, they were correct. Jesus didn’t receive teaching; He brought

teaching. He didn't parrot the teachings of others — which was the style of teaching their leaders presented, citing a long line of rabbinic sources. Christ was His own source for His teaching — literally, His doctrine — which was simultaneously His ID for both who He was and where He came from.

Now this was not anything new. When He had given His Sermon on the Mount, that presentation had been filled with: ***“You have heard it said . . . But I tell you . . .”*** Six times He uses that model to express God's true intentions regarding His word. Jesus was not just declaring God's word; He was declaring Himself to be God's word. That was the authority for which people expressed such amazement when He was finished. And if you'll remember, that's how John Himself introduced Christ in the opening words of His gospel: ***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God — John 1:1.*** And then what happened? ***The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us — John 1:14a.***

But Jesus made clear where the words the crowds were hearing that day ultimately came from: ***“My teaching . . . comes from the one who sent Me” — Jesus Christ, John 7:16.*** And then He gave them a great way to confirm that source for themselves: ***“Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether My teaching comes from God or whether I speak on My own” — Jesus Christ, John 7:17.*** In other words, simply living in obedience to the revealed word and will of God will confirm the truth of Christ's words — they both come from the same place or, better said, the same Person. And because the focus of Christ's teachings is His Father, and Him alone, He is clearly not doing anything for His own benefit. Obedience is what is driving Him, not glory. The only glory He is concerned about is His Father's — which He uses to point out that, as someone seeking the glory of the One who sent Him, there is, to use the Greek, no “unrighteousness” in Him. He is sinless; He contains no moral wrong. What about them?

And that's when Jesus abruptly turns the entire tone of the moment onto them: ***“Has not Moses given you the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law. Why are you trying to kill Me?” — Jesus Christ, John 7:19.***

The Jewish crowd that day was trying to come to grips with the words coming from Christ. Well, what about the word they had studied, that they did claim — the law of Moses? Had they been obedient to that word, which any Jew would have understood as having come from God. If in fact He is sinless, which would mean keeping the law in every respect, how could they as sinners, failures in keeping the law, try to attack Him, even to the point of killing Him?

“You are demon-possessed,” the crowd answered. “Who is trying to kill You?” — John 7:20.

Today we might say, “You're crazy!” The fact is that some in the crowd may not have been aware of their leadership's intentions toward Jesus, while those who actually lived in Jerusalem may have been very cognizant of their plans. But this would have also been just one of several accusations that had already been leveled at Christ by this time in His

ministry: lawbreaker (breaking the Sabbath), blasphemer, deceiver, and demonically possessed. This list would grow as His ministry continued.

Jesus said to them, “I did one miracle, and you are all amazed. Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a boy on the Sabbath. Now if a boy can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with Me for healing a man’s whole body on the Sabbath? Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly” — John 7:21-24.

Christ is referring to the healing He performed at the Pool of Bethesda, when He enabled a lame man to be able to walk again. Following His healing, He had instructed the man: ***“Get up! Pick up your mat and walk” — Jesus Christ, John 5:8b.*** Now all this had happened on the Sabbath. The man had been faulted by leaders who saw him carrying his mat on the Sabbath; that was work. But so was any kind of healing work. This healing had not been necessary to save the man’s life; therefore, it too had been work.

But as Jesus correctly pointed out, when obeying the command to circumcise a male child eight days after his birth, when that day falls on the Sabbath, the circumcision was still performed. Why was that OK and healing a needy man’s entire body was not? Christ’s conclusion: Don’t let appearances be what sways you. Judge based on righteousness — meaning the standard of what God’s law required. This idea has continued down to our present day. “Lady Justice,” a symbol of justice that has existed since the 16th century, is blindfolded to characterize justice as impartial, not subject to the impacts of appearances — just like what Christ said.

At that point some of the people of Jerusalem began to ask, “Isn’t this the man they are trying to kill? Here He is, speaking publicly, and they are not saying a word to Him. Have the authorities really concluded that He is the Messiah? But we know where this man is from; when the Messiah comes, no one will know where He is from” — John 7:25-27.

As the crowd is still trying to grasp Christ’s teachings, those there who actually live in Jerusalem are aware of their leadership’s desire to destroy Jesus. They know the power of these men, yet here is their avowed enemy, speaking and teaching very publicly, and nobody appears able to stop Him. Of course, no group of men, no matter how powerful or how threatening, was ever going to intimidate Christ, but that noticeable lack of action on their leaders’ part made some question if that in itself was a signal that their leadership had maybe concluded that this Radical Rabbi was in fact possibly the long-awaited Messiah.

But they were also wrestling with a common, long-held misconception, that the Messiah was somehow going to simply magically appear out of nowhere. They had thought this from a misreading of the prophetic, 400-year-old words of Malachi: ***“I will send My messenger, who will prepare the way before Me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come” — God speaking, Malachi 3:1.*** In Jesus’ case, they knew (or thought they knew) where He was from — Nazareth (nobody seemed to have a clue about His actual birth in

Bethlehem). So, because they knew where Christ came from, and they thought the Scriptures said you couldn't know where the Messiah came from, therefore Jesus couldn't be the Messiah. Simple, right?

But then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, spoke up, as only He could, repeating the only origin of Himself He knew to be true: ***“Yes, you know Me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on My own authority, but He who sent Me is true. You do not know Him, but I know Him because I am from Him and He sent Me” — Jesus Christ, John 7:28-29.*** And note that Jesus was not above using sarcasm to make His point — here the point being that, “Oh, so you think you know Me and know where I am from. Really.” But His sarcasm was not to put people down to make them feel like idiots, but to make them stop and think about what they thought was true, getting them to consider that maybe they were wrong — about a lot of things.

At this they tried to seize Him, but no one laid a hand on Him, because His hour had not yet come. Still, many in the crowd believed in Him. They said, “When the Messiah comes, will He perform more signs than this man?” — John 7:30-31.

In this moment, the anger of some in the crowd causes them to try and apprehend Jesus, but nothing man can do can overwhelm what the sovereignty of God has in mind to do, including the timing. In God's timing, laying hostile hands on Jesus was simply not going to happen. Now we don't know how Jesus escaped their plans; we only know that He did — all because it wasn't time for that to happen yet.

But despite the animosity of some, many in the crowd believed in Christ, and there was a wonderfully simple logic at play in their minds: If Jesus of Nazareth is NOT the Messiah, then is there somebody greater than what He's said, and what He's done, who is still on His way? Is there somebody more than this — more gentle with sinners, more amazing in teaching, more awesome in healing, more loving with everybody? How could somebody be greater than this greatness who's been right in front of us for over two years now? And so, our story ends.

APPLICATION

This story today, although following the thoughts and passions of different groups of people, essentially boils down to the single most impacting question in the entirety of human history: Who is Jesus? Is Jesus of Nazareth, this incredibly Radical Rabbi, really who He presented Himself to be? The stakes in that consideration are, to put it mildly, eternally large.

Now many people today judge Christ not on who He actually is, but rather on who they want Him to be or, maybe put a more accurate way, on who they hope He isn't. You see, if He's a nut, they can laugh at Him. If He's an agitator, they can ignore Him. If He's a liar, they can dismiss Him. If He's a world-class philosopher, they can study Him. If He's a really good guy, they can admire Him. And of course, if He is no more than an interesting historical figure of some 2,000 years ago, they can bury Him — 'cause He's dead.

But if Jesus of Nazareth is exactly, precisely who He said He was, who the scriptures tell us He is, then it is before Him that, as Paul wrote so eloquently to the Philippian church, that *every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father — Paul, Philippians 2:10, 11 (ESV)*. And it will be the answer to that question — who is Jesus — that will determine the eternal populations of heaven — and hell. And the fact is, Jesus never gave us the option of considering Him in any other way than how God’s word presents Him. That is the only option available. Any other viewpoint is a fail — guaranteed. And that’s what I’d tell nonbelievers.

CONCLUSION

Now, what would I tell believers — what would I tell us? If we have experienced “new birth” in Christ, then we’ve already bowed our knee and confessed with our tongues who Jesus is. So, what’s that leave for us? Living the life. Who do we say Jesus is based on how we live our lives? How do our lives define and reflect His importance to us? Better yet, how do our lives define and reflect how much His life has changed our lives?

You see, what we all need to realize is that, for many people we may meet, we could very possibly be the first Bible-believing Christians they have ever met. We may belong to the first church they’ve ever heard of that actually teaches and preaches the truth of God’s word. And if it is true regarding nonbelievers, as we mentioned last week, that we believe in a book they don’t read which proclaims a Messiah they don’t know who preached a gospel they don’t accept, then, in a very real sense, we may be the first Bible a nonbeliever ever reads. How are our lives gonna read to them? What are our lives going to tell them about the difference that Jesus Christ can make in theirs? What are our lives going to tell them about the Savior we proclaim? Not our words, but our lives?

Christ called believers a “*light that was to shine before others*” — *Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:16a*. The apostle Paul called believers *Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us* — *Paul, II Corinthians 5:20a*. That’s why we’re here.

That’s why we talk about a faith “that looks like something.” That’s why we often ask the question: “How is your life in Christ different today than it was last week, last month, last year?” That’s why we offer Sunday School and Bible Blast and Youth Group and Bible studies; that’s why we preach and teach biblical truth. Folks, we have a light to shine. We have a King to represent. None of that is burden. Every last bit of it is privilege — and part of belonging to the kingdom of God. And it has never been more important to be God’s light, to be His ambassador, than it is right now.

Ask yourself this question: Do the unsaved around you matter? It is estimated that approximately 85% of all the people we see in a given day are going to spend their eternity in hell. Does that matter? It mattered so much to our Master that He died to offer them life. Does it matter to us that His life is still available to them?

What are our lives saying about our Lord Jesus Christ? Let’s pray!