

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL ATTEMPT (John 7:32-52)

2.27.22

Description: *The Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, upon hearing the crowds wondering if Jesus might be the Messiah, attempt to arrest Him.*

INTRODUCTION

We are basically continuing what we have been talking about over the last three weeks, which has featured Christ's teachings during the Festival of Tabernacles being celebrated in Jerusalem set against the background of the Jewish leadership's opposition to Him and the growing number of voices from the crowds trying to determine, in the face of having never encountered anybody like this Guy before, exactly who this Radical Rabbi really is. And it seems like, the more the leadership opposes Him, the more people are curious about Him. So here we are — returning to the fall of the year mere months from the end of Christ's earthly ministry. And as we return, let's begin with **a moment of prayer.**

TEXT

We actually need to start this week's story by including the couple of verses at the end of last week's Scripture: *[T]hey 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*. It is that conjecture of the crowd — wondering if Jesus of Nazareth actually could be the Messiah, and simultaneously asking how there could be somebody greater than what they are hearing and seeing from this Nazarene — that leads into what follows:

The Pharisees heard the crowd whispering such things about Him. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees sent temple guards to arrest Him — *John 7:32*.

Now obviously, at least in their view, the leadership cannot let Jesus just keep doing what He's doing — which is undermining their authority, drawing the larger crowds, making the bigger impacts, showing all these wild "signs and wonders." They have to put a stop to all this, or they fear they will lose everything, mostly of course referring to things that directly impact them. So, they turn to the temple guards to go and apprehend this Radical Renegade. Now the temple guards were basically a temple "police force" whose members came from the Levites. Their chief responsibility was to maintain order in the Temple area. And how could they maintain order with Jesus drawing all these crowds with His every word? So, the temple guards were dispatched.

What is sort of ironic about all this is that they themselves, that is, the leadership, are at that moment under arrest — spiritually. They are all held captive by sin, and they are seeking to get rid of the One, and only One, who can actually bring them into a life of freedom such as they've never even imagined. But their hearts are stubbornly closed to anything but their own self-interests. But even as they are trying to permanently "shut Him up," Jesus continues to teach, all the while confusing and bewildering them with His statements.

"I am with you for only a short time, and then I am going to the One who sent Me. You will look for Me, but you will not find Me; and where I am, you cannot come" — *Jesus Christ, John 7:33-34*.

These are both words of grace and words of warning. Jesus is stating very plainly that there is a window closing — a window of opportunity to hear the word of God directly from God Himself in human form. He would repeat this sentiment to the crowds of Jerusalem in some of His final

words to them prior to the cross: ***“You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light”*** — ***Jesus Christ, John 12:35-36a***. His time on earth was coming to an end as He would be returning to His Father in heaven. He would no longer be available to be heard and watched. And consider the stark contrast between these words — “where I am, you cannot come” — with His wondrous words of promise to His disciples: ***“I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am”*** — ***Jesus Christ, John 14:3b***. But nobody in the crowd that day seemed to understand what He was telling them:

The Jews said to one another, “Where does this Man intend to go that we cannot find Him? Will He go where our people live scattered among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks? What did He mean when He said, ‘You will look for Me, but you will not find Me,’ and ‘Where I am, you cannot come’?” — ***John 7:35-36***.

The people were trapped in the moment, unable to think beyond their momentary, earthly confines.

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” By this He meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified — ***John 7:37-39***.

Now on the last day of the festival, Jesus drew all attention to Himself. With all the power of His voice, He called out to the crowds, reminding them of the visual they have seen over the last week — the priests pouring out the water from the pool of Siloam onto the altar. Now, on the final day, He places Himself squarely into this commemoration of God’s gracious greatness, thus now redefining what that water means: While it meant deliverance from physical thirst in the wilderness, Jesus is declaring Himself to be the water that will mean deliverance from the spiritual thirst occurring as a result of wandering in the wilderness of sin. Not only will He provide rescue from sin with His upcoming sacrifice for all sin on the cross but, following Him, His Holy Spirit will provide “rivers of living water” that will continue to reside and refresh and spiritually rejuvenate every single person who believes in Him.

And what an amazing invitation Jesus shares; listen how broad and inclusive He is: ***“Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me . . .”*** — ***Jesus Christ, John 7:37b-38a***. Do you hear what he is saying? Nothing in the human condition disqualifies anybody from the Savior.

Yet we can disqualify ourselves. Notice the simultaneous narrowness those same words convey: ***“Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink”*** — ***Jesus Christ, John 7:37b***. Why is that narrow? Being thirsty is about recognizing need. Thirst is a lack of something; it is a need. Remember what Jesus once said to the Pharisees? ***“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. . . . For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”*** — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 9:12b, 13b***. Christ was calling out to people who recognized their need.

And the crowd listening that day should have found some resonance with words that would have been shared some six centuries before by the prophet Jeremiah: ***Lord, You are the hope of Israel; all who forsake You will be put to shame. Those who turn away from You will be***

written in the dust because they have forsaken the Lord, the spring of living water — *Jeremiah 17:13*. That “living water,” the Lord Himself, was standing right in front of them.

On hearing His words, some of the people said, “Surely this Man is the Prophet.” Others said, “He is the Messiah.” Still others asked, “How can the Messiah come from Galilee? Does not Scripture say that the Messiah will come from David’s descendants and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?” Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. Some wanted to seize Him, but no one laid a hand on Him — John 7:40-44.

The great question remains: Who is this Guy? Some people thought that Jesus was the fulfillment of Moses’ words all the way back in Deuteronomy: *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to Him — Deuteronomy 18:15*. Others thought Jesus must be the long-promised Messiah. The mistake some in the crowd were making were seeing “Prophet” and “Messiah” as two distinctly different people, while Jesus of course filled both roles simultaneously. And then there was the issue of Jesus being understood to be from Nazareth. The prophet Micah had clearly stated that the Messiah must come from both the lineage and village of David — Bethlehem. That appeared to disqualify Jesus right away, the people again mistakenly understanding Jesus as coming from Nazareth, His birth in Bethlehem and His lineage through David being completely overlooked. And there were those who simply wanted to be done with Jesus once and for all; they sought to seize Him but were prevented.

The Greek word for “division,” which defined the crowd regarding Jesus, is the word from which we get our word “schism” — a split or division between strongly opposed parties. When it came to Jesus, there were intense, ultimately violent, feelings which would infiltrate all levels of relationship in society, no matter how close those relationships were. Nobody should have been surprised; Christ Himself had predicted this outcome: *“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law — a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household’” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 10:34-36 (quoting Micah 7:6).*

Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and the Pharisees, who asked them, “Why didn’t you bring Him in?” “No one ever spoke the way this Man does,” the guards replied. “You mean He has deceived you also?” the Pharisees retorted. “Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in Him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law — there is a curse on them.” Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, “Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?” They replied, “Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.” — John 7:45-52.

Now remember that way back at the beginning of this Temple scene, the priests had decided that enough was enough, and they had sent their temple guards to arrest Jesus. But they came back empty-handed. The chief priests and Pharisees were furious. “He’s one Guy. Just look for somebody surrounded by a whole crowd of idiots hanging on His every word. You can’t miss Him.”

But it wasn’t from not knowing who Jesus was that prevented them from “doing their duty.” It was something more: *“No one ever spoke the way this Man does” — the temple guards, John 7:46*. Now some of this is comparative. These guys were at the temple all the time. They had

been listening to rabbis for years. But nothing they had ever heard — not the words or the authority behind them — matched what they were experiencing with this Radical from Nazareth.

In fact, by the construction of the Greek sentence with the word *anthropos* — from where we get our word “anthropology,” the study of man — the guards were essentially telling their bosses, “This guy is no ordinary human being.” In a sense, the temple guards had been “arrested” by His words.

But the chief priests and Pharisees would have none of it. Ironically, they were the ones with the greatest access to all the information necessary to see who Jesus truly was. But their sinful pride would not allow them to go that direction. Instead, Jesus was their enemy. So, they angrily replied to the returning guards: “What’s the matter with you guys? Don’t tell us He’s tricked you, too. Do you see any of us believing in Him? Do you see anyone with even the least bit of education and knowledge believing in Him? No! So, take a look; who do you see believing in Him? Only a crowd of fools who don’t have the slightest concept of our law and who altogether couldn’t come up with a brain cell between them. In fact, may their idiocy be a curse on them!”

But then one of their own, Nicodemus, stood up to speak. Now following His late-night meeting that is recorded in John 3, Nicodemus may have become a secret disciple of Christ — secret, like so many, out of fear of reprisal from the leadership. So, as long as they had just brought it up, he speaks to them from the perspective of that law: “Excuse me for asking, but doesn’t our law allow for somebody to make their case before we start condemning them?”

But the anger of the leadership sweeps his “point of law” aside, showing their prejudiced feelings toward people from the northern parts of their country: “Oh, are you one of his fellow Galileans too? Save it, Nicodemus; you know that no prophet has come from there” — showing the power that pride can have over intellect: The prophet Jonah came from Galilee. But no matter what argument could have been made, the leadership by this time had decided unequivocally that Jesus of Nazareth must die. That would be their sole aim during the remainder of Christ’s ministry.

APPLICATION

There are two basic pieces to take with us as we look at this section of Scripture.

First, we have over the last couple of weeks seen and heard all the differing opinions by the people of his time exactly who Jesus of Nazareth might be. There was a wide range of possibilities given. But let’s make this as clear as possible: There is no such thing as a “neutral” position on Jesus Christ. No less an authority than Christ Himself stated this in very plain terms: **“Whoever is not with Me is against Me, and whoever does not gather with Me scatters” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 12:30.** There is no answering “none of the above” when it comes to Jesus Christ. Nor is there an option such as is found in our current U.S. census questionnaire, which offers under the category of “religion” an option that states, “none,” as in “no religious affiliation.” Somewhere around 20-29% of Americans currently answer their religious affiliation as “none.” However, when it comes to Jesus Christ, this is not a question of religion but rather of relationship. Either we are in a relationship with Jesus Christ, surrendered to His lordship over our lives, or else we are opposed to Him. There is no middle ground; there is no neutrality. At the very end of history, either our names are found written in the “book of life” or they are not. There is no optional place where our names may be listed, no “give me just a little more time; I’m not ready yet; I haven’t made up my mind yet; I’m still studying the possibilities.” Wherever

our hearts are at the end of our earthly lives, that answer is then locked — and either our names are found in the book of life, or they are not. No other options.

This is not a new idea. It wouldn't have been new in Christ's time either. The prophet Elijah made it clear to the nation of Israel some 800 years before Jesus walked the earth. When Israel had thrown in with Baal-worship, following the lead of King Ahab, Elijah challenged them with these words: ***“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal is God, follow him” — Elijah, on Mount Carmel, I Kings 18:21.*** In simple terms, Elijah was telling Israel: “You can't have a divided mind when it comes to the Lord. Either bow to Him or move on.”

In our day, we hear that “all religions are the same.” You know, that's probably true, including Christianity — when Christianity is reduced to mere religion. So how are they the same? To paraphrase Shakespeare's “MacBeth,” they are “all full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” They signify nothing because they mean nothing — not to God, anyway. God is not interested in religion. Jesus Christ was not slaughtered on a cross for religion. The only thing that matters is relationship.

Which also means that all the aspects of a relationship with Christ — love, forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration, outreach, maturing — are all just as nonnegotiable as is the relationship in the first place. The same thing applies: Either we are all in on the life, fully surrendered, or don't bother.

CONCLUSION

And, as we close, one final piece. Its absence in the text that makes it even more remarkable. We talked last week about how one of the many insults Jesus endured was the false accusations that got thrown His way: lawbreaker (breaking the Sabbath), blasphemer, deceiver, and demonically possessed, to the point that the temple guards were sent to arrest Him. And yet, what do we find Jesus doing? Not retaliating. Not calling down judgment. Not hating. Instead, we find Him continuing what He has been doing His entire ministry: sharing the word of life. Talk about tough love. Jesus showed it, loving in every way possible to people who absolutely wanted nothing to do with Him — except to grab Him and kill Him. And yet Christ's message never varied.

It's like this: Say somebody says something or does something that hurts us — whatever it is. It's a fallen world, folks; that stuff is guaranteed going to happen, whether from family, friends, acquaintances or strangers. Now, between that person and God, that is sin. But for us, it is a test — a test of our response, a test of how our response to that incident reflects our faith and reliance on God through His Son, Jesus Christ. Do we trust that God knows all about it, that He saw it when it happened? Do we trust that God knows best how to deal with it? Do we trust that God can empower and enable us to respond in a way that is pleasing to Him? Do we trust that responding God's way — forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration — is the best way?

Jesus modeled how we are to respond, which is disciple Peter made particular note of: ***To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth.” When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly — I Peter 2:21-23 (quoting Isaiah 53:9).***

One of the most profoundly impacting opportunities we have to spread the gospel is found in our responses to life — to other people, to circumstances — whatever it might be. They are the “pop quizzes” of the Christian faith — not questions of doctrine or systematic theology, but rather just the moment-to-moment challenges of life — and those responses are all about bringing glory to him. That’s what everything in our lives is about — bringing glory to Him. And our responses, regardless of the context, shape most clearly who we truly believe Jesus Christ to be. So, when stuff happens, who is Jesus Christ — not to anybody else, but to us? Let’s pray!