

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL RELATIONSHIP

(John 8:21-30)

3.20.22

INTRODUCTION

In our story today, we are still in Jerusalem, listening to a continuing conversation, or maybe better said a debate, that Jesus is having with his opponents, as Jesus is trying to get them to understand that, “Yes, this is really me; this is really the Messiah!” They have been going back and forth about whether Christ’s testimony is valid: The religious experts say “Invalid!” because they only see a single solitary guy. Jesus says “Valid!” based on his relationship with and the witness of his Father. It is that specific part of this contentious conversation that we will be focused on today. So, as we begin, **let’s start with a word of prayer.**

TEXT

Once more Jesus said to them, “I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come” — John 8:21.

It is important to note that, as we continue, Jesus is repeating himself to them. In obvious other words, Jesus is sharing words that he has already previously given them. Why? Why does anybody ever repeat themselves? They repeat themselves to make sure that they are understood, to make sure that the audience to whom they are speaking is understanding the meaning of what is being said.

Now put that in the context of his audience. Jesus is speaking to people who have been entertaining thoughts on how to get rid of this guy. Everything they have tried to do to discredit him, to make him look foolish, to trip him up in his words, to challenge him, has ended in catastrophic defeat, and has usually wound up making them look discredited and foolish and tripped up. They have become so desperate to end the problem that is Jesus of Nazareth that they have even quite openly entertained ideas on how to have him killed. Now, common sense would tell us that these are the last people who Jesus should care about, and yet that is precisely the audience to which Jesus is extending himself to try to get them to understand the truth of just Who and What he is.

But he is also making sure they understand that he is going a direction of his choosing. When he says, ***“I am going away,”*** he is literally saying, “I go my way” — declaring both God’s sovereign rule over his life and his willing obedience to that rule.

But he is saying more than that. When he tells them that ***“you will look for me, and you will die in your sin,”*** he is referring to the fact that they are continuing to look past him to the “messiah” that they think is coming, that they think is God’s design. That is their great sin, that they just blow past anybody that seems to be operating outside their preconceived notions of what their “messiah” should be like — which helps explain part of Christ’s frustration with them. Again, as he had once told them, ***“You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” — Jesus Christ, John 5:39-40.*** Their own Scriptures had already told them of the Messiah that was standing right in front of them — but they were too spiritually blind to see, too spiritually dead and too spiritually stubborn to consider that God just might have plans outside their own precious ideas.

And because they hold so resolutely to their own ideas, and refuse to even consider the evidence shouting to them from their own scriptures, because they continue to look for another “messiah” and therefore refuse to bow down and surrender to the Messiah whom God has so lovingly sent right into their midst, as Christ says, not triumphantly but sadly, “[Y]ou will die in your sin.” They will overlook the One sent to redeem them from their sins, and therefore will face judgment and go into eternity with their sins still fully intact and unforgiven.

And before we move on, consider for a moment the incredible contrast between what Jesus tells his opponents — **“Where I go you cannot come”** — with what Jesus would tell his disciples — **“[I]f I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am”** — **Jesus Christ, John 14:3**. And that outcome is completely based on recognizing who Jesus is. That’s why Paul could so confidently tell the Philippian church that, as a result of surrendering our lives to Jesus Christ and his therefore becoming the master we follow: **[O]ur citizenship is in heaven — Paul, Philippians 3:20a**. And despite the glorious eternity that would be theirs to experience, his opponents refused to do that.

So upon hearing what Jesus had said, **This made the Jews ask, “Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, ‘Where I go, you cannot come’?” — John 8:22.**

In Jewish theology, it was taught that there was a very special part of Hades reserved for those who took their own lives. Were his opponents trying to twist Christ’s words to make it sound like he was going to kill himself? How cool would that be, they might have thought; he would be punished forever and ever — even worse than what they were planning for him. That was Judaism’s unpardonable sin; there was no evil worse than committing suicide.

But [Jesus] continued, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins” — John 8:23-24.

Here Jesus gets even more explicit on who he is. He tells them where he is from. He tells them he is not of this world. And then he reiterates what he desperately wants them to understand: Remaining on the path they are on — their path of blind and stubborn unbelief — will not only cause them to die in their sins but it will deprive them of the very Messiah, the very Savior, they so urgently need.

And to make himself even more clear, Jesus presents himself in the context of “I AM” in a way that this audience would completely hear: **“[I]f you do not believe that I AM, you will indeed die in your sins.”** In other words, if you cannot commit, if you cannot entrust yourselves to me being “I AM,” being Yahweh God himself, you will die in your sins. There is nobody else to believe in for eternal life except Jesus of Nazareth, who alone became God in human flesh. Without the redemption that God was offering based on that single act of faith in Jesus Christ, in who he is and what he came to do, they would enter eternity unredeemed — they would die, meaning eternal separation from God, because of their sins.

“Who are you?” they asked. “Just what I have been telling you from the beginning,” Jesus replied — John 8:25.

Keep in mind that these were the religious “experts” of their time, but even after all that Jesus has been telling them, they will still not believe, to the point of asking him at this point in the conversation, “Who are you?” But he has been telling them nothing new. His words and his works have all been lights attempting to pierce the darkness of sin with the truth about both who he is and what he is. From the beginning of his ministry, he has not deviated from his message or his ID. “I am exactly who I’ve said I am.”

He goes on: ***“I have much to say in judgment of you. But he who sent me is trustworthy, and what I have heard from him I tell the world.” They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father — John 8:26-27.***

Jesus now presents even more claim to his deity. He says that he will be their judge. That in itself was an incredibly bold statement, for Jews believed that judgment belonged exclusively to God. In addition, he claimed to be sent by God, and he claims to have heard his teachings directly from God. But they did not understand that the “he” who sent him is his Father. They couldn’t grasp that the “him” who gave him his message to “tell the world” was his Father.

Now keep in mind that his audience is on the lookout for anything they can find that will prove him guilty of crimes against the Mosaic Law. His claims of deity would be the most despicable, incriminating words of blasphemy imaginable — unless Jesus is speaking the absolute truth which, of course, he is. Then he continued:

“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him” — Jesus Christ, John 8:28-29.

Now Jesus adds even more to his deity in that he predicts his own future, at the same time bowing to his Father’s sovereignty — a point that he made to Pilate when he said: ***“You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above” — Jesus Christ, John 19:11a***, echoing the words he would speak to the Pharisees: ***“No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father” — Jesus Christ, John 10:18.*** But when he speaks of the Son of Man specifically being “lifted up,” his words have a double meaning:

- 1) The first is the obvious meaning of being lifted up to be crucified. Jesus alluded to this during his meeting with Nicodemus: ***“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him” — Jesus Christ, John 3:14-15.***
- 2) The second meaning is of being lifted up for exaltation and praise, totally worthy for one who would be obediently fulfilling his Father’s plan of salvation.
 - a) The apostle Paul referred to this meaning when he wrote that ***[God] raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand (the “right hand” being the place of honor) in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come — Paul, Ephesians 1:20-21.***
 - b) It is what Peter so passionately preached to the Pentecost crowds in Acts 2: ***“God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out***

what you now see and hear. . . . God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah” — Peter, Acts 2:32-33, 36b.

It would be through Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension that the truth of who he was would be most fully revealed. This would be the essence of the message of the new church as it began to impact the world with the gospel.

Jesus continued to proclaim his deity: He was speaking only what had been directly taught him by his Father, that God himself had sent him into the world, that he was always with him, and that everything that Jesus was doing, everything that his opponents were seeing and hearing, were only and always things that pleased his Father. Through it all was the constant refrain: “My Father, my Father. I am sent here because of my Father. I speak based on my Father. I am not alone because of my Father. My obedience is the pleasure of my Father. All I am is because of my Father.”

Even as he spoke, many believed in him — John 8:30.

Remember that all of this is taking place while Jesus was teaching in the temple courts. There were the usual crowds gathered around Christ who had been listening to him, and they had largely remained while Jesus argued with the religious experts. In listening to him, many in the crowd may have come to the same conclusion the temple guards came to when dispatched by the leadership to arrest Jesus: Nobody ever spoke like this guy. And in listening to him speak, many placed their faith in him, meaning that they entrusted their souls into his care. Why? They took Jesus of Nazareth at his word: ***“I Am.”***

APPLICATION

There are many things we could speak of here, but the one I feel drawn to focus on is boldness. The dictionary defines boldness as both (1) willingness to take risks and act innovatively, and (2) confidence or courage. The Bible also has a definition of boldness in a wonderful verse that the apostle Paul gave to his young friend, Timothy: ***[T]he Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline — Paul, II Timothy 1:7.*** Boldness is an outcome of the Spirit of God dwelling in his kids. And we certainly see that kind of boldness in how Jesus is facing off with his opponents.

So why is Jesus acting so boldly? Jesus is acting boldly because he knows he is completely within his Father’s sovereign care. Nobody can even touch him outside of his Father’s sovereign care. As Paul noted: ***If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? — Paul, Romans 8:31b-32.*** And look at what Jesus did as a result:

- 1) He loved proactively, meaning that he fully and completely initiated love regardless of the response. We need to remember: Jesus is debating with people who, in a matter of months, are going to be walking by him while he’s nailed to the cross, mocking him as they pass: ***“He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself!” — the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders, Matthew 27:42a.*** And yet his confidence in his Father allowed him to continue to show the depths of his Father’s love for them.
- 2) He presented the gospel completely, knowing that that was his purpose in coming — to present and to literally become the gospel that offers salvation to all.

And wow, did that boldness ever translate to his disciples and the early church. In Acts 4, when Peter and John were arrested for preaching in the name of Jesus, the Sanhedrin threatened them if they continued to do so. But there was such boldness in their demeanor and such strength in their attitude in the face of persecution that *[w]hen they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus — Acts 4:13*. Their boldness reflected their Master.

And when they went back to their own people and reported what had happened, they prayed, not that threats or persecution would go away, but rather that the Lord would *“enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness” — Acts 4:29b*, bringing life to OT words over 900 years old: *The wicked flee though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion — Proverbs 28:1*. And even in the midst of his ministry, while he was sitting in jail, Paul was continuing to ask the churches to *pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak — Paul, Ephesians 6:19-20 (NASB1995)*. He ought to speak with boldness because the Spirit of God had made his promises so clear to him — and he knew that.

So what does this “boldness” mean to us? Well, as impolite as it may be, let me answer that question with some questions. Do we believe that *[i]f God be for us, who can be against us? — Paul, Romans 8:31b*. Do we believe, as the apostle John wrote in his first letter, that *the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world — I John 4:4b*. What do we believe?

If we believe that those things are true, then we should live our lives in the encouraging promise of those truths. We should be fearless in our outreach with the gospel. We should be fearless when an opportunity comes up to serve the church. We should be fearless in our relationships with each other. When someone is hurting physically or emotionally, we should fearlessly come alongside them — immediately. When someone has felt hurt by an unkind word or action, we should fearlessly seek to repair it — immediately. When forgiveness needs to be asked or granted, we should do so fearlessly — and immediately. This place should literally be vibrating with the power of our claiming God’s great and many promises and, as Paul wrote, *since we have such a hope (those great and many promises), we are very bold — Paul, II Corinthians 3:12*. If all those promises are true, why not?

CONCLUSION

And as we close, we need to see in the example of Jesus in this story that there was also a merger going on that fueled his boldness — the merger between Christ’s confidence in his Father and his passion for those outside the kingdom. Neither one of those should be limited by anything. The Bible is overflowing with verses reflecting the confidence we can have in our Father’s protective care as we reach out with the gospel he has so graciously provided us. And the Bible is equally overflowing with verses reflecting the passion of the Father and his Son for the lost — all those outside their kingdom.

Folks, the church cannot operate like we are just some kind of a social club, meeting once a week in a world where everything is alright. Folks, nothing in this world is alright! Check the news if

you don't believe me. The rampant, unchecked hate and violence is not alright. The unparalleled divisiveness we see all around us is not alright. People living in such poverty they can't even feed themselves is not alright. People and families being destroyed by alcohol and drugs is not alright. People being destroyed by war is not alright. And approximately 11 million people dying so far this year apart from the salvation offered by God through Jesus Christ is not alright. But we are here, positioned by the gifts, talents, passions and abilities that God has so graciously given us to lead us into specific ministry possibilities, to fearlessly proclaim the gospel, to fearlessly present Jesus Christ, to a world that is spiritually, eternally, dying without that gospel.

Folks, every day is one less day we have to participate in our Father's holy mission. And in our story today, Jesus showed us the boldness we can claim to present the gospel foundation of that mission to all those around us. So, let's get on with it — for the glory of His name! We have absolutely nothing to fear. Let's pray!