

January 18/19, 2020

Witnesses for the Defense

These Things are Written that You May Believe Series

John 5:31-47

Pastor Bryan Clark

We've just come off a season where we have both remembered and celebrated our belief that, at a point in human history, the God of the universe took on human flesh to become the Savior of the world. Now if you didn't know the story, wouldn't you think that the category of people most likely to celebrate and receive God in the flesh would be the religious crowd? I mean, these are the people that supposedly love and serve God. Wouldn't they be the people most likely to enthusiastically receive God when He became flesh and walked on the earth? Yet we know it was the polar opposite. It was the religious crowds that were the primary antagonists when God took on flesh and walked on this earth. There's such a tendency to believe as long as it's religion, it gets us to God, when the truth that Jesus is trying to help us understand is: it's actually religion that becomes the barrier to experiencing a meaningful relationship with God.

That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, we're back in the Gospel of John, Chapter 5. If you're new with us, we've been working our way through the Gospel of John. We took a little time off for the Christmas break. Last we were in John's Gospel, we kind of ended in a weird place—halfway through chapter 5. It's just kind of the way it worked.

At the beginning of John chapter five, Jesus heals a man who has either been sick or paralyzed for thirty-eight years at the pool of Bethesda. He very intentionally heals him on the Sabbath in order to expose the fallacies of the thinking of the religious leaders. So now the religious leaders are very upset. As a matter of fact, they are so upset they are plotting to kill Him. Now again, process this. You're talking about the religious leaders of the day. They are now so opposed to God in the flesh that they are plotting to kill Him.

There are two primary charges. One is, "You're claiming to be God." The second is, "You broke the Sabbath. You broke our rules," (their interpretation of the Sabbath) "and you must die." Jesus now begins to put forth His defense, and His defense is not a denial of the charges but actually an embracing of the charges. He *is* claiming to be God, and that is the basis by which He can work on the Sabbath. So, like in a courtroom, Jesus presents five witnesses for His defense. We pick it up in verse 31.

"If I alone testify about Myself, My testimony is not true." (*NASB, John 5:31)

Now, what Jesus is not saying is that His testimony is false, but rather it's the idea that if He claims to be God, then there should be some evidence of that. Anyone could claim to be God, but probably more than that, the word **true** could be translated *admissible*. In a Jewish court, any charge required two to three witnesses, and so Jesus is claiming to be God, and He's saying that just My word alone would not be admissible. So now He's going to present witnesses to affirm His claim. Verse 32:

"There is another who testifies of Me, and I know that the testimony which He gives about Me is true."

Now I think verse 32 is referencing the Father, and we'll come back to the Father in just a couple of minutes, but I think it is the transition or the hinge into the first witness. The first witness is John the Baptist. Verse 33:

“You have sent to John, and he has testified to the truth.”

Now if you were here at the beginning of our study of the Gospel of John, this hopefully sounds familiar. In John chapter one we were told that the religious leaders sent a delegation to John the Baptist to find out who he was and what he was doing. That's where they had the classic conversation where John said, “I am not the Christ. I am not Elijah. I'm not the Prophet. I'm just here as a voice to announce that the Messiah has come.” The Pharisees specifically sent a delegation asking him if he's not the Christ or the Prophet or Elijah, who exactly gave him authority to do what he's doing?

John was getting a significant following. He was creating quite a stir, and he was baptizing Jews. Now baptism was not unusual in the first century, but it was a baptism of Gentiles who were converting to Judaism. John was baptizing Jews in a baptism of repentance, so there's kind of this offense. “Who exactly gave you the authority to do that, and what do you think you're doing baptizing Jews, and what are they repenting of? But the whole movement of John was repenting of not only their sin, but their own self-righteousness, to prepare them to receive the Savior. So that's what Jesus is referring to there.

His first witness is *John the Baptist*, and He's saying, “John the Baptist already told you who I am and why I'm here.” John the Baptist said, “Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Verse 34:

“But the testimony which I receive is not from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved.”

In other words, Jesus is saying that it's not just because John says He's God, but rather His credentials ultimately come from the Father. But the reason He's going back to John the Baptist is He wants them to listen. John told them what they needed to hear. He wants them to accept it, to repent and to be saved. So He's saying, “My first witness is *John the Baptist*, and I want you to think what he said, because I really want you to be saved!” Verse 35:

“He was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.”

Now we have to guess there just a little bit what He means by that, but I think it's highly likely He's simply referring to the fact that probably, initially, the religious leaders were excited to hear that possibly the Messiah had come. In their minds He was going to overthrow Rome, and then they would be in charge. So initially there was a level of excitement, but when they began to realize that that's not what Jesus was going to do, they weren't so interested. Jesus is now kind of disrupting their system. Jesus is exposing their hypocrisy, and so now they're not so happy with it.

The rejection of witness number one reminds me of a lot of people in our culture who would be okay with Jesus. “I'm okay with Jesus. I like Christmas. I like Easter. I'm fine with Jesus. I go and visit Jesus once a week at church. But for the most part, I'd like Jesus to stay at church. I'm not really interested in someone who is gonna cramp my style. I'm not interested in someone who's going to expose my sin, not really interested in repentance and confession. I'm not really interested in counting the cost. I'm not interested in facing my sins and my need for a Savior. I'd like Jesus on my terms—

kind of like Him to stay at church. ‘If I need You, I’ll call you.’” Our culture is full of people like that. They reject the message of John the Baptist. Witness number one: “I don't think so.” Witness number two. Verse 36:

“But the testimony which I have is greater than the *testimony* of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me.”

So, witness number two would be *His works*. John makes the claim at the beginning of his Gospel, “This is actually God in the flesh.” But neither Jesus nor John is asking people to just simply believe that, but rather, the whole Gospel is full of evidence to support that claim. That's even what John writes: “*These things are written that you might believe.*” So, Jesus says the second witness comes from Me and My words—what John refers to as *signs*.

So, so far we've had Jesus turn the water to wine. We've had Jesus heal the Roman official's son in Capernaum, and now we've had Jesus heal the man who had been sick or paralyzed for thirty-eight years at the pool of Bethesda. Now these are not hidden, secret, maybe, maybe-not miracles. These are clear, miraculous moments! As a matter of fact, even the Pharisees—His antagonists—aren't denying that. That's the problem. His miracles are creating quite a stir. They can't deny them. Clearly, they happened. So, the attack is, “But you broke the rules. You can't do that!” Now stop and think about this. If someone among you is actually doing miracles and claiming to be God, wouldn't you, at some point, maybe take a few steps back and wonder, “Who is this man?” And yet there's going to be this growing tension where these religious leaders are determined not to believe! The problem is not a lack of evidence. The problem is they refuse to believe. They're running the show. They're in charge. Jesus is infringing on their territory, and He must be stopped.

Those who reject witness number two, would be those in our culture who always say they want proof; they want evidence, but there will never be enough evidence. There's plenty of evidence and resources for those who are genuinely seeking. But there are people where it will never be enough, because the issue is not evidence. The issue is their heart! They just simply don't want to believe.

Several years ago I was listening to an interview with Richard Dawkins, who wrote the book, *The God Delusion*, and the question was asked of him, “What if, when you die, there is a God, and you find yourself standing before this God, what are you going to say?” Richard Dawkins got kind of a smile on his face and he said, “I'll just ask Him, ‘Why did You make Yourself so hard to find?’” To which I would say, “That is utterly ridiculous! How can you miss Him? Romans 1 says, “*Just look around you. Nobody can say there is no God. The evidence is everywhere!*” It isn't a lack of evidence. It's just simply a determination to not believe, no matter what. Witness number two? “I don't think so.” Witness number three is *the Father*. Verse 37:

“And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form.”

So, I think He's referring to the Father in verse 32, and I think that's what transitions into the discussion about John the Baptist, because we remember, at the baptism of Jesus there was a voice that came out of the heavens that declared Jesus to be God's Son. John told us there was also a dove that came out of the heavens, landed on Jesus and remained, and he had been told that would be the sign. So, part of the witness of the Father was a voice from heaven.

This will happen again in chapter 12. But I think Jesus is saying more than that. John told us at the beginning of the Gospel, that Jesus is the Creator God who took on human flesh. And then chapter 1, verse 18, “*And He came to exegete, (to reveal) the Father to us.*” This comes up again later in the Upper Room. This is hours before Jesus is to be arrested, and Philip says, “*Jesus, show us the Father.*” And Jesus says, “*Philip, if you've seen Me, you've seen the Father, because I and the Father are one.*” I think that's what Jesus then is saying in verse 37: “*For those who have eyes to see, for those who are willing to listen to the witnesses, to weigh the evidence with eyes of faith, they see the Father in Jesus as He exegetes, or reveals the Father to them.*” Paul said to the Colossian believers that, “*Jesus is the visible manifestation of the invisible God.*”

This morning I can't prove this to you; you do have to take a step of faith based on the evidence. But what happens when you choose to believe that Jesus tells the truth is, God meets you there, and He affirms in your heart that what you believe is true. The Bible says when you trust Jesus as Savior, you actually have the indwelling Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of truth that lives in you, and confirms to you that which is true. So, for example, if you were to ask me this morning, “What's your number one reason why you believe this book is true?” my answer would be, “Number one: Because I have a personal relationship with the author.” Now, would that convince the skeptic? Absolutely not! I'm not arguing with the skeptic. You're asking me, and I'm saying, “Because the Spirit of truth dwells within me, part of His role is to confirm in my heart what I believe is true. That's where we get our confidence.” And that's in a sense what Jesus is saying. The disciples will see the Father. They will accept the witness of the Father as it's manifested through the Son. The Pharisees will not, and that's what Jesus said. Why? Because they don't have the word in them. They don't believe. Verse 38:

“You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent.”

The fourth witness, starting in verse 39 then is *the witness of the Scripture*.

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me;”

When He's talking about the Scriptures, He's talking about the Old Testament. That's all they had at this point. The Pharisees were passionate about the Old Testament. Matter of fact, they were far more passionate about the Old Testament than they were about the temple and the sacrificial system. You see this when you go to Jerusalem, and you see people who have dedicated their entire lives to the study of the Old Testament Scriptures but miss the whole point. And that's what Jesus just said, “*The Old Testament Scriptures are the witness about Me.*” There's kind of a movement in our culture today to diminish the importance of the Old Testament. But the Old Testament is the story—not just the story of Israel—it's the story of Jesus...it's the story of Jesus! The whole Old Testament is about Jesus. That's what Jesus says here. Verse 40:

“...and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.”

Eternal life is not found in the Scriptures. It's found in the Person revealed through the Scriptures. There's a significant difference between those two. It doesn't matter if you've memorized the whole Old Testament, as some of these rabbis had. It doesn't matter if you can quote it in Hebrew or Latin. It doesn't matter if you can quote all the early church fathers. It doesn't matter if you can come across as the greatest scholar of the Old Testament of all time. If you don't get Jesus in the Old Testament, you don't get it at all. Verse 41:

“I do not receive glory from men;”

That word **glory** means like *praise* or *reputation* or *fame*. Jesus isn't upset because they aren't paying enough attention to Him. The reason He tells them that is, He's about to turn this around. That is: the problem with religion.

“...but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves.” (Vs. 42)

So, they're full of Scripture. They're full of religion. But they don't know God. Verse 43:

“I have come in My Father’s name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, you will receive him.”

Now what He's talking about is: religion sets up this system, and other religious people come and they listen, and they praise, and they fuss over each other, and Jesus is saying, “You listen to all that, but you won't listen to Me, who has come from the Father.” And all this comes down to the core problem: Verse 44:

“How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the *one and only* God?”

This, at its core, is the problem with religion. Religion is a mutual-admiration society. So what Jesus is saying is: Religion sets up a system. Here's the rules. Here's the practices. Here's the beliefs. Here's everything that defines us. And then they step into the system they have created and congratulate themselves for their ability to perform within their system. And that's what He's saying, “You're so busy glorifying one another in your religious system that you don't see Jesus.” In other words, religion is not what leads people to God. Religion becomes a self-righteous, self-glorifying, mutual-admiration system. And in the process of all that, people fail to have a relationship with Jesus.

The rejection of witness number four would be those people that have heads full of knowledge, lots of religion, can quote lots of the Bible, could get a quiz right every time. They quote the church fathers; they quote all this stuff, and come off as scholars who thoroughly understand all this—but they don't know Jesus! They've just missed the whole point. They think because everyone around them in the religious system is applauding them, that they're on track—and that's the very noise that drowns out the voice of God. The last witness is *the witness of Moses*. Verse 45:

“Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?” (Vs. 45-47)

The fifth and final witness is *the witness of Moses himself*. The Pharisees, the first century religious leaders, revered Moses. They revered the Old Testament; they revered Moses. As a matter of fact, there's quite a bit of credible evidence that indicates by this time in the first century, they actually believed that Moses would intercede for them, and that's why Jesus is carefully selecting His words. At the end of the story, Jesus will not be their accuser. “*Moses will be your accuser, the very one upon whom you've set your hope. You think he's going to be your intercessor, but he's going to be your accuser, because what you've missed is the whole of the writings of Moses are about Jesus.*” This is a really clear statement at the end of verse 46, that everything about the old covenant—the writings of Moses—is about Jesus.

The old covenant was never meant to be a means of salvation. It was meant to be a standard by which the people could measure themselves and understand their own sinfulness and their need for a Savior. The Savior, then, was pictured throughout the old covenant. Jesus was pictured in the tabernacle, in the temple, with the ark of the covenant, with the furniture in the temple, with the sacrificial system, with the Sabbath, with the feasts and festivals. Everything was a picture—a foreshadowing—of the One who would come to be the Savior of the world. If the religious leaders thought that by strictly obeying the old covenant system—the writings of Moses—they could be saved, Jesus is saying, “That’s the very system that will condemn you.”

As a matter of fact, Paul, in writing to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 3, actually calls the old covenant *a ministry of death*. He also calls it *a ministry of condemnation*. It was a tutor to lead us to a realization that we need a Savior. But no matter how thoroughly they thought they understood the Scriptures, if it doesn’t lead them to Jesus, they have no hope. Verse 47:

“But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?”

Very interesting. What Jesus is saying at the end of this discourse is, “The very thing that you thought would lead you to God has become the barrier that prevents you from hearing the message of God.”

Five witnesses presented; five witnesses rejected! Because these people were so deeply entrenched in their religion, they weren’t about to let Jesus interfere with that.

I want to close by just rereading verse 24 that, to me, states the truth so clearly:

“Truly, Truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.”

Either that’s true or it’s not. Either Jesus tells the truth or He’s a big liar. But what Jesus wants you to know is, “Just because it’s religion, don’t think that that gets you to God. The only hope you have is through Jesus, the Savior.”

Our Father, we're thankful this morning that You tell us the truth. In a world full of religion and religious confusion, Lord, open up our eyes, open up our ears, open up our hearts to see and accept Jesus. In His name we pray, Amen.

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2020 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.

Witnesses for the Defense

That You May Believe

John 5:31-47

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. Why do you think people refuse to believe in Jesus? Is it a lack of information or something else?
2. In what ways can religion be a barrier to Jesus?
3. Have you known people who have a lot of Bible knowledge but don't seem to understand Jesus and the Gospel? What do you think blinds them to the real message of the Bible?

Bible Study

1. Do a quick review of what has transpired in John 5:1-30. Why did Jesus choose to heal on the Sabbath?
2. Read John 5:33-35. Compare with John 1:19-34. What was the witness of John the Baptist? What did John tell them? Why do you think the religious leaders rejoiced at first when they heard John then changed their minds?
3. Read John 5:36, 37. What were the three signs (works) that gave witness to Jesus being God in the flesh? The Pharisees knew Jesus healed the man at the pool of Bethesda because that was the charge, he healed on the Sabbath. How could the Pharisees be so blind as to be more concerned about Jesus breaking the Sabbath than amazed that Jesus just healed a man?
4. Read John 5:37,38. Compare John 1:1-2, 14, 18. Also John 14:8-11. The witness of the Father was that the Father was revealed in Jesus. Yet, the religious leaders couldn't see Him. Why? Does religion lead people to God or create a barrier to God?
5. Read John 5:39-44. The Pharisees were experts in the OT but completely missed the message. Jesus identifies the problem in verse 44. How would you put that in your own words? What about religion keeps people from seeing Jesus?
6. Read John 5:45-47. Why will Moses be their accuser? Compare II Corinthians 3:7-18. Are the writings of Moses intended to save or to reveal the need for a Savior?

Application

1. Jesus reminds us that having a lot of knowledge about the bible is not the same as experiencing eternal life in Christ. How can we assess if we rightly understand the Scriptures? Rightly understood, where do they lead us (John 5:46)?
2. What are some practical ways we can help highly religious people see the truth? What are some things you can do to reach a self-righteous religious person in your life?
3. According to the text, how can we tell if someone is truly seeking to know God or just seeking the glory of man through religion?