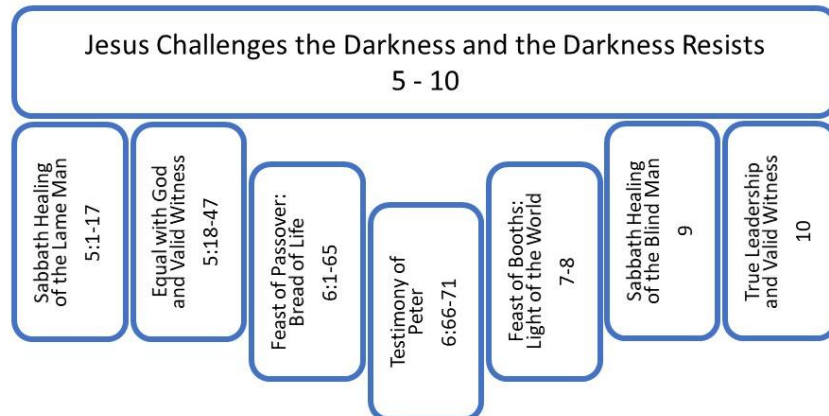


Lesson 11: John 5:31-47 Equality with God and Valid Witnesses

Introduction



Does Jesus claim to be God? That's a trickier question than it may sound? Jesus makes statements that could be taken in different ways. Jesus may refer to himself in third person as Son of God, but then he also makes the argument that all Jews are in a sense sons of God. He calls himself Son of Man, but does he mean Son of Man like Daniel 7 Son of Man seated on a throne or the more frequent Ezekiel Son of Man, meaning simply a human being. He says he is one with the Father, but also that we are one with each other.

So, when he makes the claim John 5:17, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working," we might be excused for not jumping to the same conclusion as those in his audience who angrily charge Jesus of "making himself equal with God."

But then, what claims does Jesus make of himself? Does he deflect that accusation? No, he does not. In the case of John chapter 5, Jesus does not hold back. He goes on to make these claims.

²¹ Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes.

²² "For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son,

²³ ...He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.

²⁴ ...he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life...

²⁵ ...an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

²⁶ "For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself;

²⁷ and [the Father] gave [the Son] authority to execute judgment, because He is *the* Son of Man.

These are the claims we considered in our last lesson. John records them in John 5:19-30. What kind of man makes claims like these? Who makes the claim to rightly judge every other human being? Who makes the claim to be able to give eternal life to whomever he wishes? Who makes the claim to have life in himself the way that God has life in himself?

C. S. Lewis famously argued that these are the claims of either a lunatic who really believes he can give life to other people or a fraud, a liar, who is manipulating people for his own agenda, or, if in fact the claims hold true, he is the Lord.

This is how Lewis communicated the argument in his book *Mere Christianity*.

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about [Jesus]: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. . . . Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God (*Mere Christianity*, 55-56).

A valid objection to the argument has been proposed. There is a fourth option. A person might claim that Jesus is neither Lord, liar, or lunatic, but merely legend. He is literally too good to be true. If we cannot conceive of him as either liar or lunatic, we might conclude he is not real at all.

Lewis was aware of this fourth option and gave his opinion on it in a 1950 essay titled, "What are We to Make of Jesus?" Justin Taylor points this out in an article for the Gospel Coalition, commenting that Lewis draws on his expertise as a recognized Oxford literary scholar and critic, when Lewis writes,

Now, as a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that whatever else the Gospels are they are not legends. I have read a great deal of legend and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing. They are not artistic enough to be legends. From an imaginative point of view they are clumsy, they don't work up to things properly. Most of the life of Jesus is totally unknown to us, as is the life of anyone else who lived at that time, and no people building up a legend would allow that to be so. Apart from bits of the Platonic dialogues, there is no conversation that I know of in ancient literature like the Fourth Gospel. There is nothing, even in modern literature, until about a hundred years ago when the realistic novel came into existence.¹

Jewish leaders heard Jesus' claim to be doing the works of God on the Sabbath, and they rightly interpreted Jesus as making himself out as equal to God. Jesus has gone on to state claims about himself in very strong terms. He claims the power of life and the authority to judge. He claims to hold your destiny in his hands. Believe in him and you will have eternal life. Do not believe in him and you will be judged and perish.

This is the choice before each of us. Is Jesus only a legend? If not is he a lunatic? If not is he a liar? If not, he is Lord. And, if so, will I yield to him?

Jesus does not end without giving support to his claims. He goes on to call four witnesses to affirm his claims. He calls on the witness of John the Baptist, the witness of his works, the witness of the Father and the witness of Moses. This call of witnesses is recording in our text for this lesson John 5:31-47.

³¹ "If I *alone* testify about Myself, My testimony is not true. ³² "There is another who testifies of Me, and I know that the testimony which He gives about Me is true. ³³ "You have sent to John, and he has testified to the truth. ³⁴ "But the testimony which I receive is not from man, but I say

¹ Justin Taylor, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/is-c-s-lewiss-liar-lord-or-lunatic-argument-unsound/>

these things so that you may be saved. ³⁵ “He was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. 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. 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. ³⁸ “You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent. ³⁹ “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; ⁴⁰ and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life. ⁴¹ “I do not receive glory from men; ⁴² but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves. 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. 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*? 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. ⁴⁶ “For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. ⁴⁷ “But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?”

The Witness of John the Baptist

Jesus prefaces his call of witnesses with this statement. “If I *alone* testify about Myself, My testimony is not true.” I think there are two ways we can take that. If we take Jesus as speaking in terms of a court of law this does not mean that his testimony, given alone, is false. It means it cannot be counted as true under Jewish law. The Mosaic requirement of more than one witness is stated in Numbers 35:30, Deuteronomy 17:7, and Deuteronomy 19:15, “A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.” These are witnesses for the prosecution. Jesus is following the same rule for the defense, though instead of giving two or three witnesses, he gives four.

Jesus might not have been speaking only about the legal requirement when he said, “If I alone testify about Myself, My testimony is not true.” We could also understand Jesus as saying that any claim to equality with God must be backed up by the witness of the Father and the witness of the Scripture. If the claim is not in harmony with such witnesses as these, but stands alone, on its own, then it must necessarily be false. Any true claim must be in agreement with the testimony of the Father and the testimony of the Bible.

One witness we expect is the witness of a forerunner, an Elijah figure. The prophets say that a forerunner will come. And this is the first witness Jesus calls. In fact, all four of the Gospel writers quote Isaiah 40:3-5 where Isaiah predicts one who will announce the coming of God. Here is the quote. This is the way Luke puts it. This is from Luke 3:3-6.

⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,
“The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight.
⁵ Every ravine will be filled, And every mountain and hill will be brought low;
The crooked will become straight, And the rough roads smooth;
⁶ And all flesh will see the salvation of God.”

In John’s Gospel, John the Baptist himself quotes Isaiah 40:3 when Jews come to ask who he claims to be. The only claim John will make about himself is that he is “a voice of one crying in the wilderness.” So, Jesus here calls John the Baptist as a witness. He says,

³² There is another who testifies of Me, and I know that the testimony which He gives about Me is true. ³³ You have sent to John, and he has testified to the truth. ³⁴ But the testimony which I receive is not from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. ³⁵ He was the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.

Two quick clarifications about the testimony of John. First, Jesus does not depend on the testimony of John or any other human witness to establish the truthfulness of his claims. They might support the truthfulness. They do not establish. Man does not determine truth or define God. So, Jesus says, “The testimony I receive is not from man.” The value of John’s testimony is for these people, to help people who have believed John or heard John to come to believe what already is true about Jesus. It is not true because John said it. It is true. And John said it.

Second, Jesus calls John a lamp that was burning and shining. The Gospel writer said in 1:8 that “[John] was not the light, but came that he might bear witness of the light.” Now he says that John is a lamp, a light shining brightly. Which is it? Is he the light or is he not the light? The distinction, as I have said this before, is something like the difference between the sun and the moon. Jesus himself is the one true light. He is the source of truth. What light we have is a reflection. Like the moon, it is not our own light. It is the reflection of him off of us. We are not the source of truth. We do not define truth. We recognize truth, and we communicate truth. We point others to the source of truth. We can help light a way to Jesus. But ultimately Jesus is the light. He is the one who uniquely knows the truth, because he is in unique relationship with the Father. Jesus must reveal himself.

The Witness of Jesus’ Works

After calling John the Baptist as a witness, Jesus calls his own works as witness.

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.

This is why John calls them signs because they point us to Jesus’ true nature while also affirming his teaching. Does Jesus have the authority to judge and the power to give life? What would help us to believe that this is true? Well, a man who can heal a sick son or raise up a lame man, that is the kind of man that might have the power of life, especially if these types of miracles were foretold by God as the types of miracles that the Messiah would do.

I already quoted Isaiah 35:5-6 in an earlier lesson. In light of the healing of a lame man, it seems fitting to quote the same prophecy again but with a little more context. This is Isaiah 35:2b-6.

^{2b} They will see the glory of the Lord,	The majesty of our God.
³ Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble.	⁴ Say to those with anxious heart,
“Take courage, fear not.	Behold, your God will come <i>with</i> vengeance;
The recompense of God will come,	But He will save you.”
⁵ Then the eyes of the blind will be opened	And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped.
⁶ Then the lame will leap like a deer,	And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.
For waters will break forth in the wilderness	And streams in the Arabah.

Isaiah declares that when the salvation of God comes his people will see his glory in miracles of healing; healing of the blind, the deaf, the lame, the mute. These are the signs that will accompany the Messiah. Jesus tells his audience, “Pay attention to what I am doing. Accept my works as witnesses to the truthfulness of my claims.”

The Witness of the Father

Jesus next calls God the Father as his witness.

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. ³⁸ You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent.

The witness of the Father is greater than the witness of works, though also more personally experienced. At the baptism of Jesus, God the Father affirmed Jesus. The testimony of God is objective, not depending on any human being. And yet, there is this problem that the testimony of the Lord is not heard or received because our hearts are dark, because we are dead to the voice of

God. Even though his witness is the one that counts most, it is a witness that does not impact us unless he opens our eyes to hear and to see. So, not everyone was able to understand the voice of God or to hear the voice of God. The authoritative, objective record of God's word that the Jews should accept, rather than a subjective voice that is inside of them, they should accept the written words of Scripture. And that is the fourth witness that Jesus calls.

The Witness of Moses

³⁹ You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; ⁴⁰ and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life. ⁴¹ I do not receive glory from men; ⁴² but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves. 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. 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? 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. ⁴⁶ For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. ⁴⁷ But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?

Here is a great irony of human religion. "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about me; and you are unwilling to come to me so that you may have life." The Jewish audience of Jesus is going to the right source of truth to find out how to fill the craving in their soul for true life. They are going to the Bible. And yet, even looking in the exact right place, they cannot see, they cannot find what they are searching for. Though lack of biblical knowledge is a significant contributor to human darkness regarding moral and spiritual truth, education is not the number one problem. The corruptness of the human heart is the number one problem. There are men and women in the Jewish communities, in religious studies departments, in the liberal Christian church, who know the Bible and don't receive Jesus. They don't see God.

Jesus gives indication here about how the corrupt human soul interacts with biblical truth to lead some very religious people down a false road. When Jesus says, "I do not receive glory from men," he is implying that this is, on the other hand, exactly what they are seeking. Their study of the Bible has at root a motive of self-glory.

Jesus goes on to charge that they do not have the love of God in them. That is in line with the motive of self-glory. It is about me and my glory, not about love for God. If religion is about receiving honor or glory from God and man, it is not about honoring God. I might honor God as a way to get to something. I might worship God or profess love for God or serve God, but if the motive is to receive honor for my goodness or recognition of my worship or to get something back from God, some reward for my goodness, then the motive is not love for God. It is love for me. My professed love for God comes out of a heart for myself. I want to be recognized as good by God and men. I want honor. And I want reward.

Jesus further charges that this heart motive for self-glory is reflected in the behavior of his religious opponents as they receive one another based on the honor they have accrued in society. Jesus' miraculous works should, at the very least, move these men to consider whether he is in fact from God. In this Nicodemus proved a better example. He may not have understood Jesus either, but at least he began to pay attention. He did not dismiss Jesus or seek a way to shut Jesus down without considering whether in fact Jesus truly is from God.

But these men are not concerned with the truth about Jesus unless he honors them as they believe they deserve to be honored. He is not willing to give them that. His teaching does not affirm their religious honor, their rules, their etiquette. And so, they refuse him. They consider him an enemy to their status. They presume that they have secure and stable position with God. They do not need someone like Jesus. Rejecting Jesus, they continue to give honor to one another based on their human system of honor.

Honor in the sense that I am using it is defined by social and religious norms in culture, the sociological definition for honor. We have our own cultural system of validation that makes us feel honorable or worthwhile. Oh, you graduated from university. Good for you. Oh, you have a doctoral degree. Wow. Or your children are successful. Or you are the head of your own company. Or you are an athlete. Or you belong to that church. Or you give to that charity. Wow, you have read the Bible all the way through this year. That's awesome. Or you gave your summer serving the poor. Or you're an elder in your church, and on and on. And some of the activities and achievements that confer honor in our culture really are honorable deeds. Its good stuff. Some God does not care about at all. Either way, the motive behind accruing the honor that comes from society is not love for God. It is a seeking of validation. We want to feel good about ourselves, to feel like we have value, to feel better than some people, approved of by other people. We want the rewards we deserve. Jesus rejects that human system of value. And he is telling his audience, "If that is what you are in the Bible for, if that is why you are spending all this time understanding the words of Moses, then you are reading Moses and missing life.

The Jews of his day convinced themselves that they were seeking glory for God's sake. Jesus tells them that they are seeking their own glory. Paul says something similar in Romans 10:2-3,

² For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge.

³ For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they do not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.

Jesus rejects their very basis for self-satisfaction. They believe they have understood the Law of Moses as a system of works, which, when executed properly, establishes their sense of worth and success. Jesus rejects that understanding of Mosaic religion. He tells them that he has no need to accuse them, since they are accused by the very words of Moses upon which they are trying make their own claims. Jesus tells them in verses 46-47, "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?"

Jesus is saying that you cannot have correctly understood the function of the law and the heart behind the law if you reject me. If you have correctly understood the law, then you will have love for and insight into the nature of God, which would then lead you to gladly accept me. He says, "Moses wrote about me!"

What is Jesus talking about? Where do we see Jesus in the books of Moses? This is not an abstract claim. John has given us at least four examples so far in his Gospel. If you were to think back through, John, starting in chapter 1 through chapter 4, when does John refer to Moses in reference to Jesus? What comes to your mind? Where is Moses in John? I'll give you four.

The Creation (1:1-5)

The first is at the very beginning of the Gospel in the first five verses. "In the beginning was the Word...all things came into being by him." John writes of the beginning, of the making of all things, of word and light and life. He is linking Jesus with the creation, with the first verses of Genesis chapter 1. We may not have recognized the presence of Jesus in creation, but John assures us that he was certainly present and active.

Indwelling the Temple (1:14-18)

In the second half of the prologue, John shifts to Exodus. He writes this in 1:14 and 17.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth...¹⁷ For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

John brings together the story of God's glory indwelling the tabernacle, that's in Exodus 40, and the story of God revealing his name in Exodus 34. John brings both of those together, because God's name is his true character and his glory is the display of that character. So, his name and his glory go

together, and they are made visible in Jesus Christ. This glorious character described to Moses in words is now revealed in the flesh in Jesus Christ.

The Passover Lamb (1:29)

Maybe getting into something that should have been more obvious in the Old Covenant, the third reference came in John 1:29 when the Baptist saw Jesus and linked him to the Passover.

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

The Jews should have recognized that the Passover Lamb was a substitute that does not really take away sin. The ritual is that the blood of the Passover lamb was applied to the door of each Jewish home that the angel of wrath might pass over those families. And the original message from Moses was that the Israelites had not escaped the judgment of God any more than the Egyptians. The Egyptians deserved judgment but so did the Israelites for their own sin. So, by faith they had to trust God to save them. But that lamb did not take away their sin. It only serves as a foreshadowing of something else, of some great salvation, of a true price that must be paid. Jesus is the true lamb that they should have been looking for, waiting for, whose death will pay for the sin of the world.

The Serpent in the Wilderness (3:14-15)

The fourth reference we have already in the Gospel of John is in John 3:14-15.

¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;

¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

The curse justly deserved by man for sin is death. Jesus will be lifted up on a cross to take that curse on himself. When Moses wrote these things, he was writing about something that must be done in the future. He was writing about Jesus.

We could go on to consider references, many, many more references not recorded by John. We could mention the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 that his seed will be a blessing to the nations; or the cutting of covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 which indicates that God has decided to take the curse of death on himself; or the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 where God gives another lamb, a ram, in place of Isaac, a substitute; or the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 where the blood of one goat covers over the law and another goat removes sin far from the people; or Deuteronomy 18 where Moses foretells that another prophet like him will rise up in Israel; or Deuteronomy 30 where God promises after exile to bring his people back and do an internal work of spiritual regeneration in them, so that they might love God with heart and soul. In all of these texts, Moses is pointing ahead to Jesus Christ. And this is just Moses. We are not even getting into all the prophecies. This is the Law.

Conclusion

So, these are the claims of Jesus, that just as the Father has the power to give life, so also the Son has the power to give life to whomever he wishes. And just as God has authority to judge men, so also the Son has authority to judge all men. Whoever believes in him will be given eternal life, and whoever does not believe will perish in eternal judgment.

Jesus has called his witnesses to support his claims. He has called on the prophesied forerunner. He has called on his miraculous works. He has called on God the Father. And he has called on the Holy Scriptures. These are his witnesses.

And just like the audience of old, each one of us faces a choice. We must ask, is this man only a legend or is he real? And if he is real, is he out of his mind to claim power over life and judgment, is he a lunatic or is he sane? And if he is sane, how can he make such claims, is he a fraud trying to manipulate me, is he a liar? But if he is neither legend, nor lunatic nor liar, what choice is left. He must be Lord. And if so, what then? Will you bow down to him and worship? Will you follow where he leads?

Reflection questions

1. Read John 5:31-47. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What are some questions that come to mind?
2. When in your life did someone fill the role of John the Baptist for you, pointing you towards Jesus? Why did you believe or trust that person? What about them helped you to believe in Jesus?
3. Concerning miraculous signs that witness to who Jesus is, how does the resurrection affirm what Jesus has said about himself in John 5:19-30?
4. Have you experienced miraculous works in your life or the life of someone you know that have served as a witness pointing to the reality of Jesus Christ?
5. How do you understand the witness of the Father as a testimony to the truthfulness of Jesus?
6. How has the Word of God worked in your life to affirm for you who Jesus is?