

CHRISTIAN SELF-DEFENSE

John 8:48-59

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“You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him” (Jn. 8:44).

Sometimes in a football or basketball game, an angry player will suddenly attack one of his opponents. Instead of going after the ball or following the play, he will strike another player or throw him to the ground. This is against the rules, and the guilty party is certain to receive a penalty or even an ejection.

Something like this happened at the end of Jesus' argument with the Pharisees in John 8. They had come to accuse Jesus of lying, and he responded by leveling strong but just criticisms against them. Like angry players whose team has been routed, the Pharisees replied with vicious attacks on Jesus. By doing so they were risking something worse than a fine or suspension from a sports league, but eternal judgment in the court of God. Jesus' response provides a good model for Christian self-defense in a hostile world, while also providing some of the Bible's most sublime teaching on the person of Christ.

GLORY FROM GOD ALONE

The slur cast on Jesus was ethnic, such attacks often being the most vicious: “The Jews answered him, ‘Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?’” (Jn. 8:48). The Samaritans were their most despised foes, so a Jew who deserved to be called a “Samaritan” was a traitor. Moreover, since the Samaritans did not observe the law, such a person was an apostate and a heretic. In their minds, Jesus had to be crazy to say the things

he did, which was the point of accusing him of being demon-possessed.

Christians will also be unfairly maligned. One reason is that our message is so opposed to worldly thinking, so that even our virtues are offensive to an unbeliever's worldview. But a deeper reason is the sinful world's hostility to Jesus himself. He said, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you... If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (Jn. 15:18, 20). J. C. Ryle rightly commented: "Once let [a man] take up the cross and follow Christ, and there is no lie too monstrous, and no story too absurd for some to tell against him, and for others to believe. But let him take comfort in the thought that he is only drinking the cup which his blessed Master drank before him."¹

Christians can learn much from Jesus' manner of self-defense. First, he rebutted the accusation: "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me" (Jn. 8:49). Jesus had only delivered the message God sent him to speak. This is hardly what we would expect from someone with a demon! Yet still he was dishonored. It was a terrible thing for them to dishonor the Son of God. Yet this occurs continually today: "From 'Christ' to 'Jesus' and 'My God', and worse, millions execrate the Son of God and his Father every day with hardly a thought as to what they are doing."² Clearly, it bothered Jesus then, and it surely grieves him today. He might well say to the entire world: "I honor my Father, and you dishonor me."

Moreover, Jesus pointed out, "I do not seek my own glory" (Jn. 8:50). This is how Christians defend themselves against the world: seeking God's glory and not men's praise. Followers of Christ must not set their hearts on worldly approval. We must not shape our behavior by a desire to fit in, since this will compromise us in sin and leave us open to accusation. Rather, we should seek simply to honor and please God. Jesus could ask: Have I been seeking honor for myself? Is my teaching designed to make me popular or influential? These were the motives for the Pharisees' whole way of life. But Jesus lived every moment with his chief desire to glorify his heavenly

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:138.

² Gordon J. Keddie, *A Study Commentary on John*, 2 vols. (location: Evangelical Press,), 1:356.

Father. If we do the same we will be insulated against temptations to sin and also against the sting of criticism. F. B. Meyer advised: “That God may be better understood, and admired, and loved through our life...; that more hearts may be brought beneath His sway – be this our aim, at all costs to ourselves.”³ If Christians live this way, we can be contented even if only God is on our side.

Just because Jesus did not seek glory, that did not mean he would not gain it. He added, “There is One who seeks it, and he is the judge” (Jn. 8:50). Jesus knew that God would glorify him in the highest because of his humble obedience.

In fact, God had already been glorifying Jesus. His birth was attended by angel heralds. God sent magi to honor him in infancy. He proclaimed Jesus his beloved Son at the time of his baptism. Even on the cross, the Father did not permit one of Jesus’ bones to be broken, and in his exaltation God seated him at his right hand. Moreover, A. W. Pink points out that Jesus knew that God “will honour Him in the final judgment, when every knee shall be bow before Him and every tongue confess that He is Lord. And throughout eternity he shall be honoured by a redeemed people who shall esteem Him the Fairest among ten thousand to their souls.”⁴

Christians may also console themselves with a glory that comes from God. Having honored God in our lives, we have God to preserve our reputations. Paul encouraged himself with this very thought: “For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17). So while the world may honor only the proud and ambitious, Christians aim for a higher glory, for which we willingly forsake glory now and accept present humili-ation. Each of us should be able to say with Jesus: “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me” (Jn. 8:54).

³ F. B. Meyer, *The Life of Love* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, *date*), 157.

⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 463.

THE SIMPLE TRUTH

Perhaps to encourage some in the crowd who might yet believe, Jesus added a word of encouragement that challenged the Pharisees' unbelief. The familiar emphatic preface, "Truly, truly, I say to you," alerts us to its significance. Jesus then said, "If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death" (Jn. 8:51). Earlier, Jesus said that by keeping his word, believers will be set free from sin (Jn. 8:31-32). Now, he extends that promise to include freedom from death.

Far from rejoicing, his opponents were only more enraged. "The Jews said to him, 'Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death'''" (Jn. 8:52). After all, Abraham had trusted God and still died. So had the prophets. So how could Jesus claim to preserve a believer from death? "Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died?" they demanded. "And the prophets died!" (Jn. 8:53).

Jesus did not mean, however, that his followers would never die in a physical sense, but rather that we will be free from death's harmful effects. Though Christians will die, the taste of death, as the Pharisees put it, will not be in our mouths. This is in keeping with how Jesus later would put it, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (Jn. 11:25). Herman Ridderbos explains how believers will never "see" death: "Those who believe in Jesus' word already have eternal life; death is no longer facing them but behind them; when they pass away, they will not be handed over to death."⁵

The Pharisees demanded in outrage, "Who do you make yourself out to be?" (Jn 8:53). That they would ask this of the Son of God merely shows their ignorance of God, as Jesus pointed out: "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' But you have not known him" (Jn. 8:54-55).

The Pharisees had long since lost sight of God, mainly because their own traditions had supplanted biblical truth. An illustration aptly

⁵ Herman Ridderbos, *John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 318.

describes them. A teacher in a school filled with wealthy kids assigned an essay on “A Poor Family.” One rich child submitted a paper that read, “Once there was a very poor family. The father was poor, the mother was poor, the children were poor.” Getting a head of steam, he continued, “The butler was poor, the chauffeur was poor, the maids were poor, the gardener was poor.” He had no conception of poverty!⁶ Likewise, these Pharisees had ideas about God, but really they had no idea. Therefore, when Jesus promised eternal life they thought him mad.

What are we to do when accused of lunacy by people who simply cannot grasp divine truth? We should do what Jesus did, which we might consider his second self-defense strategy. First, he was able to show that he did not, in fact, live for his own glory but only for the glory of God. Now, we find Jesus simply continuing to tell the truth. He said, “If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word” (Jn. 8:55).

Notice Jesus’ emphasis on “keeping his word.” We are to stand on God’s Word, just as we are to make it the guide for our belief and conduct. No matter what they said, Jesus was going to keep his Word, and we should do the same. When people object that we are crazy or hateful, we must simply respond: “God has revealed his truth to us in the Bible. We know it is his Word and he calls us to continue telling the truth.” Let us be determined that if people are going to reject us, it is because they are rejecting God’s message. By making our message a simple presentation of God’s Word, we help people to see that they are out of step with the Bible, and that is often the first step in someone coming to faith.

This was Paul’s approach. He laid out his philosophy of ministry in these classic words: “We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). But won’t there be people who will not accept God’s Word? Yes, Paul said, in part because the devil blinds their minds. Then why shouldn’t we turn to a different approach, some may ask? Paul’s answer is that the

⁶ Cited from Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 341.

Bible is the very means God uses to open blind eyes and shine the light of his glory so that people believe. After all, this is how we were saved: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

A GREAT STORY

Lastly, Jesus’ Jewish opponents having brought Abraham into this debate, Jesus wanted to clear up this matter. He stated, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (Jn. 8:56). To the Jews, this was one last proof of his lunacy: “So the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’” (Jn. 8:57). Fifty was their retirement age; if Jesus had not even reached it, he certainly could not be old enough to have seen Abraham. Abraham had been dead for 1850 years!

What did Jesus mean by saying that Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing his day, and that in fact he had seen it? Some argue that this refers to Abraham’s present view of Jesus’ ministry from his place in paradise. But this cannot be correct, since Jesus spoke in the past sense: “He saw it and was glad.” What, then, does this mean?

Arthur Pink outlines three ways this might be approached.⁷ It may be that Abraham “saw Jesus’ day” through the promises God gave him. God told him, “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). Later, God told Abraham “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them... So shall your offspring be” (Gen. 15:5). He realized that these would come true through the birth of a single descendant, the Messiah.

Secondly, Abraham may have seen Jesus in his types. An example is when Melchizedek brought wine and bread to nourish Abraham after a victorious battle (Gen. 14:18). We know from the Book of Hebrews that this priest-king was meant to prefigure Jesus, and we also know that the wine and bread would become symbols of his atoning death on the cross. Another type of Christ was seen when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on an altar. As his knife plunged

⁷ Pink, 464.

down to pierce the heart of his beloved child, the voice of an angel halted him. Abraham then saw a ram in a nearby thicket and realized that God had provided this animal to take Isaac's place. Abraham saw the ram, which was a type of Jesus as the sacrifice for our sins. Just as the ram died in Isaac's place, Jesus died on the cross for us. This incident corresponds with Jesus' promise that those who keep his Word will not suffer death. Isaac did not die, but the ram – symbolic of Christ – died. Hebrews 11:19 tells us that Abraham understood this also to point to the resurrection. So how glad he was to see the ram. Abraham's response indicates that he was in fact looking forward to the coming of Jesus: "Abraham called the name of that place, 'The LORD will provide'" (Gen. 22:14).

Thirdly, Jesus may be referring to a personal encounter between Abraham and himself. When Abraham was living by the oaks at Mamre, three angelic visitors came to him, one of whom Abraham addressed as the Lord. This is generally understood as having been a preincarnate appearance of the Divine Son, so that Abraham would physically have rejoiced to see Jesus two millennia before his birth.

This makes an important point about the Old Testament. Jesus proves that Old Testament believers were saved by faith in him, as he was manifested in that earlier era. J. C. Ryle observes, "There never was but one way of salvation, one Saviour, and one hope for sinners, and that Abraham and all the Old Testament saints looked to the same Christ that we look to ourselves."⁸ But what a contrast between Abraham's faith in Jesus and the Pharisees' hatred. What Abraham had long to see – the coming of God's Son, the Messiah – had actually happened in their own lifetimes. Their rejection of the one Abraham trusted showed that they really were no children of his. How Abraham also would rejoice at the preaching of Jesus and his gospel today; those who refuse Jesus prove that they, too, have no part in Jesus' salvation and that eternal life does not belong to them.

All this was lost on the Pharisees. But when they expressed their incredulity, Jesus took his argument to one final, highest point: "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am'" (Jn. 8:58). His statements were not disproved by his apparent age.

⁸ Ryle, 2:139.

For though he was born in time, as God the Son Jesus is eternal in origin. John began his Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word” (Jn. 1:1). Jesus already was when the universe was made, and it was made through him. This is the claim Jesus insists on making – full deity as God’s own Son – and we must believe this to receive eternal life.

For the Pharisees, it would have been bad enough had Jesus said, “Before Abraham was, I was.” But Jesus went to the furthest extreme possible by saying instead, “Before Abraham was, I am.” Here is an unmistakable claim to the divine “I AM” – also rendered as Jehovah or Yahweh – that God gave to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:14). He *does* think he is greater than Abraham, and greater than the prophets, for they hoped in him and proclaimed his coming. As the eternally preexistent Lord and Creator, he is able to deliver on his promise to overthrow death for all who keep his word.

This gives us one last way to defend ourselves from attack. Just as Jesus did, we should share the great story of the Bible. It is not enough for us to recount specific Bible verses – important though this is. But the Bible presents one grand story, starting in eternity past, entering history through God’s work of creation. It involves the tragedy of man’s fall into sin and the cursed entry of death. But God promised redemption, through a promised Redeemer. He told Adam and Eve of Jesus’ coming. He called to Abraham to start a new nation, through which the Savior would come to the world. He used Moses to redeem Israel from slavery and lead them into the Promised Land, to keep alive the hope of the Messiah. Through David, he established the throne from which his own Son would one day rule in eternal righteousness. And one great night, with angel choirs singing his glory, God’s Son was born into this world to be its Savior. This is the story that makes sense of the world in which we live. Jesus revealed himself, showed his saving power, but was rejected by the very people God had called to believe. Through the unbelief of these very Pharisees, God’s Son was put to death on a cruel cross. But God had intended this, to provide a sacrifice not just for Abraham’s or Isaac’s sins, but for the sins of everyone in the world who trusts in him. God intended salvation not just for the Jews – though all the first believers were Jews – but for the whole world. So the story is

still being told, and as men and women and children trust in him today, they enter into it. Jesus is coming back – this is the greatest single fact awaiting history – and when he comes he will gather up all who keep his Word, and through their faith in him they will not see death forever.

DECISIVE RESPONSES

The passage and the chapter conclude with two decisive responses. They are both sober in their message. First was the response of the hardened unbelievers. Having witnessed a bold revelation from the eternal Son of God, they gathered stones to throw at him (Jn. 8:59), stoning to death being the penalty for blasphemy. They would not let go their false ideas of God, even in the face of God the Son and Redeemer. But they were actually consigning themselves to death, for Jesus had told them, “Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (Jn. 8:24).

The same stakes are involved in your response to Jesus. Has God opened your heart to see the glory of his Son? Have the truths Jesus’ told shined in your heart and mind? Do you understand the great story he came not only to tell but to fulfill so that believers may enter into heaven? If you do, then do not hesitate to leave the ranks of unbelievers. Lay hold of Jesus’ word, believe it, receive the forgiveness of your sins and enter into eternal life now.

But the last response comes from Jesus. John writes, “But Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple” (Jn. 8:59). Jesus had revealed himself and offered his promise of life. They picked up stones, but when they looked up they could not see him. God’s plan did not yet call for Jesus to die. So in the end, Jesus defended himself simply by departing. This is the stark reality for those who are faced with the truth about Jesus but will not receive him. St. Augustine gives a fitting last word, a word of warning: “As man, He fled from the stones; but woe to those from whose stony hearts God has fled.”⁹

⁹ Augustin, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 13 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 7:245.