

SPIRITUAL LINEAGE

John 8:37-47

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, November 9, 2008

“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).

The importance of our childhood and upbringing is widely recognized today. Some people carry burdens on their hearts from abusive, negligent, or simply incompetent parents.

Others gain a false confidence or sinful pride from the families into which they were born. The fact is that our lineage and upbringing do play a large role in lives.

As Jesus' long and contentious debate with the Jewish leaders continues in John 8, the subject of lineage and upbringing occupies a prominent place. The unbelieving Jews derived a false confidence from their physical lineage. But Jesus points out that their spiritual lineage is even more important, especially as it leads them to reject the Savior whom God has sent.

SONS OF YOUR FATHER

Jesus had spoken of our need to abide in his Word, through which alone his hearers could ever be free (Jn. 8:31-32). This offended the

Jews, who were proud of their supposed freedom as descendants of Abraham. “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone,” they objected (Jn. 8:33).

Such false confidence in physical lineage remains a problem today. People assume they are bound for heaven simply because their parents were members of the church. “I grew up in the church,” they assert; “I was baptized as a child and was received into communion.”

Great as these privileges are, they do not actually grant salvation, which results only from personal trust in Jesus Christ. Paul made this point in Romans to an audience similar to the one facing Jesus: “For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring” (Rom. 9:6-7).

An illustration of this principle can be seen in one of the great lineages of America, consisting of the descendants of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards. Edwards is regarded as America’s greatest theologian, and his offspring include thirteen college presidents, sixty-five professors, three United States senators, three mayors of large cities, three state governors and a vice-president of the United States. But one would be wrong to conclude that possessing the Edwards blood guaranteed civic virtue. For the highest-ranking member of this line became one of the most godless villains in American history. When Edwards’ daughter Esther gave birth to Aaron Burr, she looked upon him as a fine child. But, despite serving as Vice President of the United States, he displayed the very opposite of his grandfather’s character. Burr rejected the Christian faith, murdered the great statesman Alexander Hamilton, betrayed his country, and plotted to crown himself emperor of Mexico. A poet said of him, “Eight lines of clergymen converged to meet in Aaron Burr... But Aaron was Beelzebub in mocking miniature.”¹

Jesus was aware that fleshly lineage guarantees neither virtue nor salvation. To those who boasted in their descent from Abraham, Jesus pointed out that their claim to salvation was refuted by their hostility to him: “I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you” (Jn. 8:37).

The Bible calls Abraham “the father of all who believe” (Rom. 4:11), because he trusted the promises God first offered to him. By believing the gospel, Abraham became our spiritual model, and we become God’s children by following in the faith of Abraham.

The first difference between Abraham and the Pharisees was seen in their attitude towards Jesus: “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me” (Jn. 8:39-40). Jesus may be referring to an occasion when Abraham was

¹ Cited from R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 249-250.

sitting at the door of his tent as three visitors arrived. These were angels visiting Abraham on their way to deliver God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. But one of the three was different, since Abraham addressed him with the divine title "Lord" and he spoke to Abraham as "Yahweh" (see Gen. 18:3, 10, 13, 17, 19, 20). Christians have with good reason understood this to be the Second Person of the Trinity, so that it literally was the pre-incarnate Jesus who appeared before Abraham. Abraham raced to greet him and treated him with reverence and love. By refusing to do these very things and by seeking his life, the Jews arguing with Jesus proved that they were no sons of Abraham. A distinguishing mark of those who possess Abraham's spiritual lineage is that they worship and love God's Son, Jesus Christ.

A second mark of sonship is seen in their attitude to God's Word. Jesus said, "I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father." They answered, "Abraham is our father" (Jn. 8:38-39). Abraham believed the message brought to him; in contrast, Jesus' teaching got nowhere with these unbelieving Jews. "My word finds no place in you," Jesus said (Jn. 8:37). How could they claim lineage from Abraham when they bore so little resemblance to that man of faith?

As a model of faith, Abraham was a true child of God. But how much more qualified is Jesus to this title. Abraham received God's Word in faith; Jesus faithfully delivered God's Word. "I speak of what I have seen with my Father," he said (Jn. 8:38). Therefore, if we want to claim membership in God's family, we must love God's true Son and believe his teaching. J. C. Ryle points out that while the Pharisees were pluming themselves over their lineage, "they forgot that fleshly relationship to Abraham was useless, unless they shared Abraham's grace. They forgot that God's choice of their father to be head of a favoured nation, was never meant to carry salvation to the children, unless they walked in their father's footsteps."² Jesus came to bring God's grace to all of the world; now, even if you come from the most unimpressive family tree, by faith in God's Son you may become a child of God. And, just as Abraham's faith bore fruit in the works of

² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:122.

faith and obedience, we will prove our faith by, as Jesus put it, “doing what Abraham did” (Jn. 8:39).

MEET THE DEVIL

Jesus’ rebuke must have been terribly offensive to these Jews, who derived so much dignity from their Abrahamic lineage. But things would soon become even more offensive. For if Abraham was not their father, who was? Jesus argues that just as the patriarch’s conduct demonstrates his paternity, the same is true of them. And who might their father be? He says, “You are of your father the devil” (Jn. 8:44).

People today find it hard to believe in Satan or in other evil spiritual powers. But Jesus had no problem believing this, and the believer of the Bible is compelled to accept Satan’s existence as well. The Bible describes the devil as a fallen archangel of great power and malice. We may dismiss him with little red-horned pictures, but the devil exists as a cunning and deadly foe of God and man.

Jesus mentions two things about the devil. First, the devil is “a murderer.” This tells us Satan’s purpose and goal. Satan is opposed to mankind and to God’s plan for mankind. John Calvin states, “As soon as man was created, Satan was impelled by a wicked desire to hurt, and directed his strength to destroying him.”³ When Jesus said, “He was a murderer from the beginning,” he was referring to events at the start of the Bible. Satan’s very first appearance finds him leading Adam and Eve into the curse of death through sin (Gen. 3:1-7). It was the devil’s great achievement to cause our race to suffer death; he is in this sense the murderer of our entire race. Ryle states: “His great aim and object is to ruin us for ever and kill our souls. To destroy, to rob us of eternal life, to bring us down to the second death in hell, are the things for which he is unceasingly working. He is ever going about, seeking whom he may devour.”⁴

Jesus not only informs us of the devil’s goal but also of his method: “He... has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him... He is a liar and the father of lies” (Jn. 8:44). Satan used

³ John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 4:228.

⁴ Ryle, 2:125.

cunning lies to tempt Adam and Eve into sin. And it is chiefly by opposing truth that he continues his diabolical work today. Why don't people respond in faith to the gospel? Paul says the devil "has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4). It is under his influence that man is so prone to think that good is evil and evil is good, that truth is falsehood and falsehood is truth. "Millions are led captive by his deceit, and follow him, both rich and poor, both high and low, both learned and unlearned. Lies are his chosen weapons. By lies he slays many."⁵

The Bible says little about how Satan himself fell into evil. But Jesus gives an indication, saying, "He has nothing to do with the truth" (Jn. 8:44). Literally, this says, "He did not stand in the truth." Satan would not tolerate the truth, especially as the truth reveals Jesus mission as the Lord and Redeemer of mankind. Consequently, Jesus adds, "There is no truth in him." This is why it is literally Satanic that so many people today – including Christians – consider matters of truth and doctrine to be of little importance. By Jesus' own reckoning, Satan wants us to care only about things other than truth – such as feelings and experiences – which he can counterfeit to our destruction. As Jesus had insisted, it is by abiding in his truth that we become true disciples and by his truth that sinners are set free (Jn. 8:31-32). No wonder that truth is what Satan hates the most.

It is sad when a child is estranged from his or her parents. Some children even hate their fathers because of his neglect or abuse. But there is one father we really should hate. We have an evil father who brought us up in iniquity, who deceived us with lies, and from whom we should be utterly estranged. Have nothing more to do with the ways of the devil! Make it your business to give him a bad name by the holy manner of your life. Do not meet with him when he calls and do not answer his letters. He was a murderer in the beginning and wants only to destroy your soul. He is the father of lies; nothing he says can be accepted or believed. Let us reject his worldly appeals for our new allegiance to Jesus Christ, who saves our souls and speaks the truth, and who loved us enough to die for our sins.

⁵ Ibid.

WHY DON'T YOU BELIEVE?

The Gospel of John was written to inspire faith in Jesus; as such, it also contains some of the Bible's most searching explorations of unbelief. Nowhere is the reality behind unbelief presented more clearly than in Jesus' response to these proud but unbelieving Jews.

Jesus asks an all-important question: "If I tell you the truth, why do you not believe me?" (Jn. 8:46). This is the greatest question about unbelief. God sent his own Son to bear truth from heaven and redeem us from sin. There is nothing more that God could conceivably do for our salvation. So why do people not believe?

Jesus provides the answers. First is the one he had left hanging in the air after refuting the Jews' claim to be sons of Abraham: "You are of your father the devil" (Jn. 8:44). The reason people will not believe on Jesus is that they are not children of Abraham, the man of faith, but children of Satan, the murderer and liar. The devil is their model and unseen leader, and their spiritual character has been formed in a world that has become his nursery for unbelief.

This is something people don't like to hear. Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out that no amount of contrary evidence seems to disturb humanity's good opinion of itself. But the evidence is all around us, "from the horrors of Auschwitz and a thousand other war-time hells, through the killing fields of Cambodia... besides the daily toll of gratuitous violence, rape, abuse, abortion, torture, and murder in every corner of the globe."⁶ If Jesus' portrayal of the human condition is unpleasant, it is nonetheless verified by actual experience.

The Pharisees certainly did not like being described this way, and they replied with vehemence: "We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father – even God" (Jn. 8:41). This may have been meant as an insult to Jesus, since the circumstances of his birth might be understood as a potential scandal. "Are you sure, Jesus, that you want to debate paternity issues?" they may have meant. They must also have been thinking of the Old Testament's

⁶ Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity, 1993), 132.

statements that to be an idolater was to be like one born of prostitution. “We are not illegitimate,” they replied, “but God’s true and holy people.” After all, they may have thought, Malachi said, “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?” (Mal 2:10). But by refusing to embrace God’s Son they had in fact become idolaters, and like many who claim God as their Father today while rejecting his Son, they had forfeited all rights to call themselves children of God.

Jesus again refutes them. “If God were your Father,” he responded, “you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me” (Jn. 8:42). Jesus is all too happy to discuss his origins – indeed, it is precisely his divine Sonship that warrants their condemnation for not receiving him. Jesus is the very image of God and the radiance of his shining glory (see Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). It was precisely by rejecting him that they revealed their lineage as children of the devil, just as unbelievers do today.

What does it mean to be a child of the devil? Jesus elaborates, “Your will is to do your father’s desires” (Jn. 8:44). Here, Jesus speaks of the bondage of the human will in sin. Sinful mankind does not do what is best for itself but rather what Satan desires. Paul describes Satan as “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (Eph. 2:2-3). What does the devil desire but anger, hatred, jealousy, lust, and envy – the very things that bind mankind in sinful misery. So pervasive is our bondage to sin that it is “our will” to pursue these perverse desires. People like to talk about “free will”, but according to Jesus, our will has become enslaved in service to the devil. The greatest example of this was the determination of these very Jewish leaders to put Jesus to death, which was the single strongest desire ever formed in Satan’s heart.

Moreover, Jesus asks, “Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word” (Jn. 8:43). All through this debate, as in earlier ones, Jesus’ opponents simply did not understand what he was saying. Why is this? The Greek text makes this especially clear: “Because you are not able to hear my Word.” Two different words are used: first, *lalia*, meaning “words,” and

second, *logos*, meaning, message. “You cannot understand my speech,” Jesus says, “because you cannot grasp my message.” This is the unbeliever’s bondage under Satan: he is not only *unwilling*, but also *unable* to receive the gospel of Christ.

This is not, of course, how people explain their unbelief. In one way or another, they argue that Jesus lacks the worthiness or credibility for the kind of faith the Bible requires. But Jesus rejects this excuse. It is not because he lacks the proper credentials. “Which one of you convicts me of sin?” he demands (Jn. 8:46). This was not only the kind of bold challenge only he could make, but a “majestic assertion of his sinlessness before God and man.”⁷ The problem with unbelief does not lie on the side of Jesus. The problem is not that the biblical evidence is questionable or insufficient. The problem is not that his life inadequately proved his claims, that his miracles were somehow dubious, or that his teaching was too obscure – all objections frequently asserted.

Taking his boldness to the highest level yet, Jesus explains the real cause of mankind’s refusal to believe in him: “Because I tell the truth, you do not believe me” (Jn. 8:45). Sinful mankind does not reject Jesus because his truth is questionable but because it is not! Having been raised by the devil, man has inherited a hatred for truth; as Paul says, unbelieving man always wants to “suppress the truth” in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). A. W. Pink elaborates: Unbelieving man

will give credence to the most grotesque absurdities, but will regard with skepticism what comes to him with a thousand fully authenticated credentials. Some will believe that there are no such things as sin and death. Some will believe that instead of being the descendants of fallen Adam, they are the offspring of evolving apes. Some believe they have no souls and that death ends all. Others imagine that they can purchase heaven with their own works. O the blindness and madness of unbelief!”⁸

Jesus thus concludes, “Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God” (Jn. 8:47). A more desperate summation could hardly be conceived.

⁷ Gordon J. Keddie, *A Study Commentary on John*, 2 vols. (location: Evangelical Press,), I:351.

⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 459.

Mark Johnson comments: “It is not merely that life is muddied by ‘sins’ here and there, but that human life is literally under the control of an alien power, namely, the devil himself. The full horror of this is seen in the way that people under the domination of sin react to Jesus and his message.”⁹ Then, they sought to get rid of Jesus by murder; today, people murder Jesus again by their unbelief.

Does this not prove that salvation must entirely result from the grace of God? Man’s will is bound to Satan’s desires, and man is spiritually blinded so that he is not able to understand or receive God’s Word. Yet this very Gospel recounts numerous men and women coming to faith in Christ. How? It is all of grace. It is all of God’s power as he blesses his Word. And it is all to his glory.

HOW TO BE A CHILD OF GOD

James Boice tells a story about Dr. Ward C. Miller, a Philadelphia dentist who was called “the amalgam king” for perfecting a way to make amalgam fillings that looked just like more expensive inlays. Miller had many students, including one who set up practice on the west coast, thousands of miles away. Once, a man came in one for dental work, and the former student asked, “Are you from Philadelphia?” When the man said he was, the dentist replied, “I thought so. Your work has been done by Dr. Ward C. Miller, the amalgam king.” The imprint of Miller’s work was there to be seen.¹⁰

Whose imprint is displayed in your life? Until God becomes your father through Jesus Christ, there can only be one other who marks you as his own. Whether we know it or not or whether we like it or not, Jesus says that those who reject him are of the devil, with their wills bent to his desires: believing lies, using other people, and living with hate, envy, lust, and pride.

It is sadly true that many people never overcome their bad upbringing. But that need not be true of your service to the devil through sin and unbelief. Instead, you can become a child of God. How? John tells us this comes through faith in God’s Son, Jesus Christ: “To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he

⁹ Mark Johnson, *Let’s Study John* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 127.

¹⁰ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 2:654.

gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:12-13). But if you will not believe, then Jesus’ words loom before you as the crack of doom: “You are not of God” (Jn. 8:47).

If you have professed belief in Jesus, what marks will reveal you as a true disciple and a child of God? The answer is the very opposite of the marks these unbelieving Jews displayed. They sought to be rid of Jesus, if necessary by murder. But the child of God does God’s will and not the devil’s. He serves Jesus with love and reverence, as Abraham did when the messengers arrived at his tent. Unlike these unbelieving Jews, you are to give place to Jesus’ words in your heart. Unlike the devil, who did not stand in the truth, take your stand on the Word of God. Jesus said, “There is no truth in him” (Jn. 8:44), so let the truth abide in you. Jesus concluded, “Whoever is of God hears the words of God” (Jn. 8:47). So as little Samuel said when he heard God’s voice in the temple, may you also say, “Speak, LORD, for your servant hears” (1 Sam. 3:9).

And if you hear the Word of God, if you give it room in your heart, if you stand in the truth and if the truth abides in you, you will know with joy that you are no longer a child of the devil but a child of God. Jesus promises, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:31-32).