

The Father and the Son: John 5:17-24
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
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It's amazing to think of the baby born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger. Wrapped up in blankets by His mother, the newborn would appear to be so dependent, so helpless. And yet He was (and is, and has always been) the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son, equal with the Father, infinitely powerful, able to raise the dead, possessing the power to judge all mankind, worthy of our honor and praise.

A week from today we'll gather here to celebrate Jesus' birth. His humble entrance into this fallen world. I do hope you'll join us this coming Saturday evening for our Christmas Eve service, and then on Sunday morning for a Christmas Day worship service. I'll be preaching shorter messages in each of those services, messages taking a simple and straightforward look at the birth of Jesus, telling the story of those events recorded for us in Matthew and Luke. I hope you'll be here. I hope you'll invite family and friends to come with you. What an amazing thing this is: God's eternal Son coming to live among us as one of us, the God-Man, Immanuel, God with us. What exciting news this is that we have to celebrate. What Good News this is that we can share with others.

I hope you'll reflect on these historical events that are at the very center of history. The rest of history hinges on this Person and His involvement among us. The baby born in Bethlehem, the Savior of the world.

As the angel told Joseph, "[Mary] will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21) We have much to celebrate at Christmas. Christmas trees and presents and family traditions are wonderful, and I hope all of it will be meaningful to you this year. But I hope you realize there's a lot more to Christmas than that. I hope that the truth about Jesus will be at the center of your thoughts about Christmas and that Jesus will enliven all of our traditions and festivities.

Well, this morning we're continuing our study of the Gospel of John. We'll take a short break for Christmas and New Year's—the sermons will be on other passages—and then we'll come back to this series on January 8th, Lord willing. What we have this morning is a passage that reveals some weighty truths about Jesus' relationship with the Father. These verses are all about the Father and the Son. Last week we studied John 5:1-17, the account of Jesus healing a crippled man on the Sabbath, the Jewish day of rest. The Jewish religious leaders, cold-hearted as

they were, didn't even rejoice in the healing but rather used this as an opportunity to criticize Jesus.

As the chapter continues, in the verses we'll examine today, we'll see that the opposition against Jesus is mounting. Sabbath infractions are one thing. Serious as they are in the minds of the religious leaders, there's something that is far more serious. Namely, claiming to be equal with God.

As I read the passage, beginning in verse 16, pay attention to the controversy that is emerging here concerning Jesus' words and actions, having to do with His identity. Also listen for the multiple references to the Father and the Son. These verses are all about the relationship of the Father and the Son. As Jesus speaks here, He makes many references to the Father and the Son.

Last week we concluded with verse 17 where Jesus makes the statement, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." And I made the point about Jesus' work which purchases our rest. We're not burdened with a legalism like those Jewish religious leaders who were such sticklers about their Sabbath laws that they couldn't even celebrate this man's healing. We have a Savior who is the embodiment of Sabbath rest. He is the One who worked for us in order that we don't have to work. Indeed, we must not presume to work for Him as though we can earn anything from Him. He has done all the work and has called us to rest in Him, to trust in Him, to honor Him by believing that He has accomplished all that needs to be done for our salvation.

That was the lesson last week about the Sabbath. And I believe Jesus intentionally performed miracles on the Sabbath in order to make that very point. He knew exactly what He was doing. He wasn't surprised by the legalists opposing Him. In His words and actions, He was making very bold statements concerning His identity. Indeed, He was claiming to be equal with God.

The Father and the Son Are Equal

A piece of background here that is helpful to understand has to do with the common understanding of the Father working and how that relates to the Sabbath. The religious teachers, in their preoccupation with Sabbath observance, tried to come to terms with the fact that the Father is always working. Because, of course, He is. He has to be working. Or else the universe would come crashing down. We would all cease to exist.

We don't live in the universe imagined by the Deists. Deism teaches that God is like a watchmaker who put the universe together, wound it up, and let it go. Now He is uninvolved in the intricacies of our world. That is not Christianity. That is not the One living and true God revealed in Scripture.

Our God is a God who is involved in every detail of our universe, involved in every detail of each one of our lives. Romans 11:33 says, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” Not only does everything come from Him, but everything also exists through Him—it is upheld by His power. And, of course, it is all for His glory.

The rabbis of Jesus’ day admitted and therefore wrestled with the concept of God the Father working all the time, not just six days a week, but seven days a week. Because, after all, if God took a day off, everything would spin out of control. Well, here’s how the rabbis settled the matter in their minds. Part of their Sabbath regulations included the distinction between carrying something within your house versus carrying something from one house to another. Apparently it was permissible to move something from one part of your dwelling to another, but it was not allowed to carry something from your house to another person’s house. Based on that they reasoned that since the whole universe is God’s dwelling place, it’s OK for Him to do His work on the Sabbath. His work never involves Him moving anything outside His house. Very creative resolution to the problem.

The point being . . . when Jesus claims to be working just as His Father is working, the Jews recognize that He is claiming to be equal with God. That’s what John makes clear for us in verse 18. “This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.” They recognized that Jesus was claiming a very close connection, a very close relationship between Himself and God the Father. And they didn’t like it one bit. It infuriated them. They wanted to kill Him.

And that sets up what Jesus is going to say in verses 19 and following.

But before we delve into those details, let’s step back and review some important and related verses we’ve studied earlier in John. John 1:1-3 says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.”

John is intentionally taking us back to the moment of creation and even before creation. He’s making a point there about the eternity of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the Word, is eternal. He was there even before the world was created. In the beginning, when there was nothing but God, the Word existed.

Those next two statements, simple as they are, convey the majesty and mystery of our God. The Word was with God, and the

Word was God. The statement “the Word was with God” tells us that the Word is distinct from God. The statement “the Word was God” tells us that the Word is one with God.

Can you sense the depth of what is being revealed here? How can Jesus (the Word) be God and with God at the same time? Well, when we put this together with many other verses in Scripture a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith emerges. And that is the doctrine of the Trinity. The God revealed in Scripture is a God who is simultaneously One and Three. One God in Three Persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This point about Jesus being equal with God, being fully God, is so important because if Jesus is not fully God then He cannot fully save sinners. Which then leaves you with a religion based on your own works, at least in some measure. Because only God can fully save. Anyone less than God might be able to be a good example for us, or a good teacher, but he cannot fully atone for our sin if he’s less than fully God.

Why is that so? Because our sin is an infinite offense against God. You can’t quantify the damage your sin has caused, not only to other individuals, but most significantly the degradation and dishonor that has been heaped upon Almighty God. It is an infinite offense, because He is infinitely holy. And therefore, considering the gravity of our sinfulness, we understand that it took the God-Man, Himself an infinite Being, to fully pay the penalty for our sin.

I want you to feel the weight and the importance of this teaching about the eternal Word, the Son, Jesus Christ, who is equal with God the Father and distinct from Him. Jesus Christ is distinct from God the Father and equal to God the Father, and this is a mystery at the very center of the Christian faith. We can’t fully understand how this is, but it’s crucial to our salvation that this is so. If there is not a Triune God, if there is not a God-Man, then there is no hope of forgiveness. This Christmas let’s marvel afresh at the Good News of Jesus being equal with God the Father, the Good News of Immanuel, God with us.

The Father Leads the Son

This is a marvelous mystery, and we can’t fully understand it. But there is more to understand here. There is more revealed. In Jesus’ statements in verses 19 and following He pulls back the veil and offers us a glimpse of the inner workings of the Trinity. Verse 19 reveals a truth that is complementary to the truth that the Father and the Son are equal. This does not contradict the fact that the Father and Son are equal. It is a complementary reality. The Father and Son are equal in essence as God. But that doesn’t mean

their roles are interchangeable. They are equally divine, and yet they relate to one another as Father and Son.

Look at what Jesus says in verse 19. He's saying this, not at all to diminish what the Jews have correctly understood Him to be saying, namely, that He is equal with God. He most certainly is equal with God. And what He says now emphasizes the unique and very close relationship He has with the Father. They are equal and distinct. And here we learn a bit about the distinction between these two Persons of the Trinity. In this very, very tight relationship, here is how the two relate to one another. Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise."

I'm summarizing this with the simple heading, "The Father Leads the Son." These two who are equal in essence, are at the same time distinct in their roles as Father and Son. There is a leadership component to the Father's role as Father. And for the Son, He is following the leadership of His Father.

Remember what Jesus prayed at Gethsemane? What did the Son say to the Father? He fell on his face and prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39) That's a concrete example of what Jesus is talking about in John 5:19. The Son is so closely connected to the Father, and His relationship to the Father is such that He is perfectly in step with the Father's lead.

Don Carson has some insightful comments on this verse—John 5:19—regarding the relationship of the Father and the Son. He writes, "Though he is the unique Son of God . . . yet is he always submissive to the Father. . . . In this sense the relationship between the Father and the Son is not reciprocal. It is inconceivable that John could say that the Father does only what he sees the Son doing. That would be preposterous . . . The Father initiates, sends, commands, commissions, grants; the Son responds, obeys, performs his Father's will, receives authority."¹

Another verse that is very intriguing in connection with this is 1 Corinthians 11:3 where the apostle Paul is teaching about the roles of men and women in the church. He prefaces the discussion with this statement comparing 3 significant relationships that involve headship—there is someone who is the head, the authority, the leader. Here's what Paul writes, "But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God." Paul mentions three

¹ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (pp. 250–251). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

relationships in which one person is the head over another. First of all, Christ is the head over every man. Second, a husband is the head over his wife (you can see Ephesians 5 for more teaching on that point). Then, thirdly, God is the head over Christ. God the Father is the head over His Son, Jesus Christ.

I point this out simply to say that relationships are complex, by God's design. The relationships within the Trinity are complex, multi-layered. And human beings, created in God's image, have complexity to our relationships as well. It gives us a great deal to ponder, about God and about ourselves.

God the Father and God the Son are equals. The Father is not a higher God and the Son a lesser God. That would be heresy. The Father and the Son are equally God. They share the same essence. And yet they have distinct roles. The Father is the head over the Son such that the Son submits to the Father's will. This is not a contradiction in the Godhead. The Father and the Son are equal in essence and distinct in role.

The Father Loves the Son

And that leads into verse 20 of our text, in which Jesus speaks of the Father's love for the Son. Earlier in our study of John I've noted some occurrences of the Greek word *monogenes*, translated as "only." Jesus being the "only" Son of the Father. It shows up on John 1:14 and 18. The Word is "the *only* Son from the Father," and "the *only* God, who is at the Father's side." *Monogenes* shows up again in John 3:16 and verse 18. "God so loved the world, that he gave his *only* Son . . ." And then in 3:18, again, He is "the *only* Son of God."

That word speaks to the profound and special love between the Father and the Son. There is a very close bond between the Father and the Son. Another place in the New Testament where this word *monogenes* is used is in Hebrews 11:17. "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up *his only son*, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."

You can read that remarkable story in Genesis 22. In that event we have a very tender and tangible glimpse into the Godhead. The love between Abraham and Isaac points to the deep love between God the Father and God the Son. And Abraham's willingness to offer up his only beloved son points to God the Father who gave His only Son. The words of Romans 8:32 seem to allude back to Abraham and Isaac. Paul writes, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"

That should really pull this out of the abstract and make this concrete for us. If you're wondering why you should care about this, if you're wondering why you should be interested in the fact that the Father loves the Son so much, here's why: because the Father did not spare His own beloved Son, His one and only Son. He sacrificially surrendered His dear Son in order to provide a way of forgiveness and salvation to undeserving sinners like us. That's how big this is! It's not like the Father took 30 seconds out of His busy schedule to consider your desperate plight and say, "ok, I'll forgive you." No, it doesn't work like that. He made a tremendous sacrifice to save you. He gave up His own Son, the Son He loves with an infinite, eternal love. I hope that means something to you.

Jesus' purpose in verse 20 is to again highlight the very, very close relationship between Himself and the Father. The Father loves the Son and therefore reveals everything to Him. And if you think the healing of this man at the pool is a shocking thing, there are greater things to come. The Son will do even greater things, things that will cause us to stand in awe. This is what Jesus is saying in the rest of verse 20. And then verses 21 and following specify 2 of these "greater things." Resurrection and judgment.

Lest you think Jesus is merely a healer, He continues to undergird this claim of being equal with God by citing things that He will do that are things that only God can do. Resurrection and judgment. The second one, judgment, we'll come back to and discuss when we return to our study of John in January. The discussion of judgment begins in verse 22 with the mention of the Father giving all judgment to the Son, and then that theme continues through verse 30. So we'll come back and address that theme of judgment in a later sermon.

For the remainder of the sermon this morning I want to make 3 more brief points. The first has to do with resurrection in verse 21.

The Father and the Son Raising the Dead

"For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will." Raising the dead is obviously something only God can do. The Jews agreed on this point. The rabbis had a saying, "Three keys are in the hand of God and they are not given into the hand of any agent, namely that of the rain (Deuteronomy 28:12), that of the womb (Genesis 30:22), and that of the raising of the dead (Ezekiel 37:13)."² Deuteronomy 28:12 speaks of God opening the heavens to give rain. Genesis 30:22 speaks of God opening Rachel's womb. Ezekiel 37, which we studied in Sunday School recently, records an amazing vision

² Cited in Leon Morris, John, page 278 footnote 67.

of God raising the dead, bringing life to a valley of dry bones. The Lord says in Ezekiel 37:13, “And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people.” There are also verses like Deuteronomy 32:39, where the Lord says, “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.” And one more I’ll mention, since we studied this recently in our Sunday School curriculum going through the prophets and kings. When Naaman came from Syria to the king of Israel to be healed of his leprosy, the king of Israel tore his clothes and said, “Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?” (2 Kings 5:7)

Anybody who knows anything about Yahweh knows that He alone can give life. He alone can raise the dead. And then we read Jesus’ bold claim in John 5:21, that the Son also gives life to whom he will.

We get glimpses of this in Jesus healing those who are sick, which we’ve seen right here in John 4-5. He healed the official’s son. Then He healed this man at the pool. Later in John we have the account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus had been dead 4 days. He was really dead. And Jesus, with a word, called Lazarus out of the grave.

But what is most significant is the spiritual life He gives, as we learned in what Jesus taught to Nicodemus about the new birth. The Son graciously and sovereignly brings spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead. He gives life to whom He will. This is part of the work that He is doing along with the Father, part of what indicates the Son’s equality with the Father. As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom He will.

Honoring the Father and the Son

And then I want to call your attention to verse 23 where the word “honor” appears 4 times. We’ll talk about judgment in a later sermon, but notice the purpose of the Father giving all judgment to the Son. It’s so that the Son may be honored as the Father is honored. “that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father.”

Then there’s a statement that wipes away all religious belief and religious activity that ignores the centrality and deity of Jesus Christ. “Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.” That is a sentence you should spend some time considering. Just think of the religious people who claim to be honoring God with their lives, with their busy religious calendars, with all the good things they’re doing. Or those who

pretend that they are spiritual, religious individuals because they have some warm, fuzzy notions about a higher being. Or even those who claim some allegiance to the Bible and to Christian morals and beliefs, but they don't affirm the full deity of Jesus Christ. Maybe they look to Jesus as a good example, as a heroic figure. But they don't embrace the fact that Jesus is equal to God the Father. For a person in any of these categories, they would probably scoff at you if you suggested that their spirituality is not honoring to God.

But look at what Jesus says. If you're not honoring the Son . . . and in the context here that would entail honoring Him as the Second Person of the Trinity, equal to God the Father, fully divine, the God-Man, able to bring the dead to life, having authority to judge. If you're not honoring the Son, then you are not honoring God the Father who sent the Son. It's as simple as that. Jesus, Himself, says it in no uncertain terms. Thus Jesus challenges us to consider whether our spirituality is like a fluffy cloud that, when you try to get your hands on it, you find out there's actually nothing there. Or do you have a personal trust in the Son?

Hearing the Son, Believing the Father, Having Eternal Life

And that leads to the last thing I want to highlight in this passage today. Verse 24, "whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." This is belief that has substance to it. It's not a fluffy cloud that may look nice for a moment but then evaporates into nothing. This is real spiritual life. It arises from the miracle of regeneration. The person who exercises this faith is the one who has been born again, who has been regenerated. These individuals truly listen to the Son. They hear what Jesus is saying and heed His words. And thus they are also believing the Father, the One who sent the Son.

And notice this, in the middle of verse 24. Notice the present tense. This person *has* eternal life. It doesn't say the person *will have* eternal life. Jesus says that this person *has* eternal life. If you've been born again, if you are hearing the word of Jesus, believing the Father who sent Jesus, then you are right now in possession of eternal life. This new life has already been given to you, and it is a life that will continue on forever. You belong to Him. You have a personal relationship with Him. And nothing can ever take that away from you. Nobody can ever take that away from you. Hearing the Son, Believing the Father, Having Eternal Life.

Well, we've covered a lot this morning. I admit that this passage is a somewhat difficult one. Jesus reveals some very deep truths about Himself and His relationship to the Father. And I

struggled to know how best to unpack some of the material here. After a couple weeks we'll come back and continue to look at what Jesus says in the continuing passage. And I look forward to studying this further with you. I think an important take-away from this study is what Jesus says at the end of verse 20, "so that you may marvel." Whatever you can grasp from these verses, and whatever leaves you puzzled, the take-away should be amazement. We should be in awe of our great God, our Triune God. We should marvel at the cooperation of the Father and the Son and the Spirit to bring about our salvation.

This week we can marvel at the fact that the Father sent His own Son into this world as a little baby born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger. I hope you'll come back for Christmas Eve and for Christmas Day as we marvel together at these things. As Mary did. She saw these amazing things unfolding. She saw it up close and personal. And Luke 2:19 tells us that "Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." May we do the same this coming week in anticipation of celebrating Jesus' birth.