

Unwilling to Come to Jesus: John 5:30-47
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In this morning's passage we're going to see the greatness of Jesus Christ, and opposite that we'll see in stark contrast the utter deadness and apathy of human nature in this fallen world. I entitled the sermon, "Unwilling to Come to Jesus," and I get that from verse 40. Jesus has been speaking with these religious leaders, these Jewish leaders who were criticizing Him for healing on the Sabbath, and even more outraged at the fact that Jesus was claiming equality with God. They wanted to kill Him for that. And in the course of Jesus' response to them, in the course of Jesus demonstrating evidence upon evidence that He is sent from the Father, Jesus says in verse 40, "yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life." More literally it could be rendered, "you are not willing." You are unwilling to come to me. Unwilling to come to Jesus.

And in verse 44 Jesus points out a competing desire. The complete lack of desire to come to Jesus is due to a pull in the opposite direction. Verse 44, "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?" Do you see the two paths here that are diametrically opposed to one another? It's one direction or the other. It's either human glory or God's glory. And we're all born into this world with our hearts and minds and eyes set on that path of human glory. That's what we crave, in way or another. We're enamored with the glory of other people. We are addicted to receiving praise from other people. And that love affair with human glory precludes any true love for Jesus. It makes us blind to His glory. It makes us deaf to His kind and caring voice.

These are the things I want us to meditate on this morning. These are such powerful truths, such stunning truths. If you're committed to studying the Bible, if you believe the Bible is God's Word and therefore true and authoritative, then you must prepare yourself to be surprised again and again and again as you delve deeper into the treasures of this Book. The realities Jesus talks about in these verses may surprise many of you this morning. For Jesus to say that people are unwilling to come to Him . . .? And We'll look at Romans 8 a little bit this morning, too, that teaches the inability of people to believe. These ideas may seem counterintuitive. They may go against things you've been taught about the Christian faith. They may go against things you've assumed about the Christian faith.

It's a pretty radical thing for Jesus to say, for the Bible to assert, that unbelievers are completely unable to exercise faith.

Unbelievers are completely unwilling to come to Jesus. You might say, “But I thought every person has the option to accept or reject Jesus? It’s simply a matter of whether we choose Him or not?” Which, of course, implies that we have the ability to choose Him. And it implies that at least some people eventually come around to having a willingness to choose Him. But that’s why this teaching is so radical and so weighty and so important. For it cuts at the very root of human pride. It shows that we don’t get any credit for our salvation. We can’t even claim that we made ourselves willing to come to Him. God gets all the credit, even from the point of Him needing to come to us in our condition, being unable and unwilling. He had to bring about the miracle of regeneration in our lives. He had to cause us to be born again. That’s His work, not ours. And that is the only thing that changes a person from being unwilling to come to Jesus to now being willing and eager to come to Jesus.

Well, with that introduction and summary, let’s step back now and read the passage and see the context here for Jesus’ statements about the unwillingness of the human heart to come to Him.

Jesus covers a lot in these verses. Most of it I will point out to you briefly, and then we’ll return to verses 40 and 44. Notice the witnesses to Jesus. In verse 31 Jesus is basically telling them, If you’re not inclined to take my word for it, here are some other things that attest to my legitimacy. Here are some evidences that support my claim to be sent from the Father, indeed, equal with God.

Witnesses to Jesus

1 is **John the Baptist**, mentioned by Jesus here in verses 33-35. We’ve learned quite a bit about John the Baptist already in this Gospel. John had testified to Jesus, prepared the way for Jesus. John was the one who said of Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” John bore witness to the truth about Jesus’ identity.

In addition to that (#2), **Jesus’ miracles**, His works, bear witness to the truth of His identity. This is in verse 36, the works that the Father gave Jesus to do, the works that Jesus is in the midst of doing, like healing that sick man at the pool, like healing the official’s son, like turning the water into wine, these miraculous works manifest Jesus’ glory. These show that Jesus was, indeed, sent by the Father.

And (#3) **God the Father**, Himself, testifies as well—verse 37. We think of the Father’s words at the time of Jesus’ baptism. “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” And notice there in verse 37 how Jesus begins to describe their

hardness, their inability, their unwillingness. “His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent.” Talk about offensive! These guys considered themselves to be acutely attuned to God’s voice. To be told that they are actually deaf and blind to the things of God, that would infuriate them. It would wound their pride. It’s a direct assault on the things they take such pride in.

And then a fourth witness that Jesus mentions in this passage is **the Scriptures**. Verse 39, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me . . .” And then verse 45, “There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”

From the very early parts of the Bible, from the writings of Moses, there are consistent pointers to Jesus Christ. Right after Adam and Eve fell into sin, the Lord gave that wonderful promise in Genesis 3:15, the Lord speaking to the serpent in that verse, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” The seed of the woman, ultimately fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ, was going to come and crush the head of the serpent. And just after that, the Lord killed animals in order to make for Adam and Eve garments of skins to clothe them. There was shedding of blood. There was sacrifice in order to provide a covering for this sinful man and woman. In Genesis 22 there’s the story of Abraham taking Isaac, his beloved son, to sacrifice him, as the Lord had commanded him to do. At the last moment the angel of the Lord stopped Abraham, and a ram was offered as the sacrifice instead. That event is such a powerful picture of God the Father and His love for the Son, and His offering up His Son to be a sacrifice. In the story of Joseph there are pointers to Jesus. The Passover points to Jesus. The tabernacle and the sacrificial system point to Jesus. The Sabbath points to Jesus, etc.

And listen to what Moses says in Deuteronomy 18, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen— . . . And the Lord said to me . . . ‘I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.’” Moses is clearly pointing forward to Jesus. But now as Jesus is there right in front of them, fulfilling

the words of Moses, speaking on behalf of God, the people are not listening.

There are all these witnesses to Jesus. John the Baptist, the miracles, God the Father, and the Scriptures, but there is a blindness and stubbornness that puts up a wall to block all of that compelling evidence.

You know, today is sanctity of life Sunday. And the issue of abortion provides another illustration of this moral blindness. We were talking about this as a family recently, and the question came up, “How can people think that the baby in the womb is not a person? How can people really believe that with fingers and toes and a beating heart, that somehow the baby isn’t yet a human being worthy of being cared for?” It is perplexing, isn’t it. It’s very troubling. Here we see the moral blindness that is so pervasive in the world. There are truths that are so evident, so compelling—whether it be the sanctity of human life or the deity of Christ—and yet so many people flat out deny these realities, and the root explanation is on the spiritual level. It’s a bondage to sin, a love of the darkness, a hatred of the light, and therefore a rejection of the truth.

And this brings us back to the real crux of the matter. This wasn’t just a problem for these Jews who knew the Old Testament so well and yet weren’t seeing the real meaning in it. It’s not just an issue for religious elite who take pride in their religious accomplishment. It certainly is a problem in those ways. But those are just particular manifestations of a problem that is common to all of us. The problem of not wanting to come to Jesus, not seeking the glory of God, is because we’re so caught up with human glory. This, again, is what Jesus makes so clear in verses 40 and 44 of our text today.

Old Testament Illustrations

It started in the garden, of course. **Adam and Eve** had enjoyed the beauty of life in the garden. There was peace and harmony in that first marriage, and in the whole order of God’s creation. But then the tempter came, and Eve was drawn in by his words, which offered what? The serpent said, “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” That was a promise of human glory. It was the enticement of receiving glory, of having prominence and power and knowledge. Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, and gave some to Adam as well, who was with her. And ever since then we’ve all been born with that same propensity. We want glory for ourselves.

King Nebuchadnezzar in the Old Testament is a case study on this tug of war between the glory of man and the glory of

God. Remember, he was the guy in the book of Daniel who built the huge image of gold for everybody to worship. Then, when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would not bow down to it he threw them into the fiery furnace. Needless to say, King Nebuchadnezzar was a very proud king. In Daniel 4:30 the king is looking out over his kingdom, and he says, “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” Well, immediately after this God casts him into the wilderness for seven years in order to teach him who is really in control and who really gets all the glory. By the end of those seven years Nebuchadnezzar had learned his lesson, and he acknowledged the glory of the Most High God.

“Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.” (Daniel 4:37, ESV)

You know, as difficult as it may be to come to terms with the biblical teaching of inability and unwillingness, the hope is right there in that last verse I just read from Daniel 4. Those who walk in pride he is able to humble. God can overcome even our stubborn, apathetic hearts. He can humble us so that we don’t look for our ultimate satisfaction in human glory but in the glory of God.

Now let me read another New Testament text that teaches something very similar to what we’re seeing in John 5. I want us to see the link between these two. Romans 8 teaches inability. John 5 teaches unwillingness. And the two go hand in hand.

Inability and Unwillingness

In these two verses Paul uses the word “cannot” in each of these verses.

“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it *cannot*. Those who are in the flesh *cannot* please God.” (**Romans 8:7–8**, ESV)

Paul uses the Greek word *dunamai*, which means “to be able,” and he negates it with the simple word *ou*, meaning “not.” So he’s saying very clearly that the flesh is not able to submit to God’s law. Those who are in the flesh are not able to please God. This is the total inability of the unbeliever.

Now, the implications of this are massive. So let’s make sure we understand what is being said here. The Bible is teaching us here that an unbeliever is unable to choose to submit to God. The unbeliever is not capable of making any choice that would please God.

The reason this is so offensive to our human nature is because we love the idea of free will. We would like to believe

that we are able to choose to do anything. We'd like to think that "I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul" (Invictus, by William Henly). We'd like to think that there are absolutely no restraints on our will, there is nothing holding us back from doing whatever it is we would choose to do, whether that be choosing a career or choosing to please God.

Debates about human will

The nature of the human will has been a hotly debated issue through the history of the church. In the 400s **Augustine and Pelagius** debated the issue of free will. Pelagius taught the very opposite of what Romans 8:7-8 teaches. He said that we are, indeed, able to obey God's commands. He reasoned that if God commands something, that must imply that we have the ability to obey the command. But Augustine had a very different take on the matter, more informed by what the Bible teaches. Augustine, in the *Confessions*, prays to God like this: "Give me the grace [O Lord] to do as you command, and command me to do what you will! . . . O holy God . . . when your commands are obeyed, it is from you that we receive the power to obey them." Augustine recognized that the only way we can obey God is if God gives us the grace and the power to do so. Apart from God's grace, we are unable to obey.

If we fast forward through history to the time of the Reformation, in the 1500s, **Luther and Erasmus** had a similar debate. Erasmus basically viewed Christianity as morality.¹ One lives out the Christian life by obeying God's commands, living a pious, upright, moral life. Erasmus and Luther were agreed on one thing—that the church needed to be reformed. But they had very different convictions as to what kind of reform was needed. Erasmus saw that certain superstitions and abuses needed to be cleaned out of the church. But he did not see beneath the surface, to the doctrinal matters that were of fundamental importance. That's what Luther saw. And Luther viewed this question of the will as a foundational Gospel issue. If, as Erasmus saw it, the human will is free to obey God and please God, then, yes, Christianity would be merely the attempt to live a moral life in obedience to God.

But if it is true, as Romans 8 and John 5 teach us, that the human will is in bondage to sin, unable to submit to God's law, unable to please God, unwilling to come to Jesus, in bondage to human glory, then we are driven to the real substance of the Christian faith, that God had to do something on our behalf to rescue us from ourselves. That He did in sending His own Son to live and die and rise again, to save us from the wrath we deserve.

¹ J.I. Packer's intro to *Luther's Bondage of the Will*, pg. 43.

God is the One who overcomes our rebellion and hostility toward Him and our inability and unwillingness to come to Him. God works in His sovereign way to draw us to Himself.

Then we fast forward one more time to the 1700s when **Jonathan Edwards responded to the Arminians** of his day concerning this issue of free will.² Edwards approached this question in a very precise, philosophical way. One of the things he dealt with is the objection that says (and this may be a question in your mind right now), If the will is really in bondage, if people are really unable to submit to God's law, then how can they be held responsible? How is it fair for God to punish people if they can't do otherwise?

Edwards distinguished **natural inability** and **moral inability**. *Natural* inability is when a person is unable to do something due to external restraints. If a man is supposed to be at work on Monday morning, and he doesn't show up, but the boss finds out later that the man had been mugged on his way to work and was injured and in the hospital, the boss would not hold the man responsible for missing work. That is natural inability, and in such cases a person is not held responsible. They were constrained against their will.

But *moral* inability is different. In these cases, a person is constrained by nothing other than his or her own will. They are not forced to act contrary to their will. They are acting in accord with their will. So if the same man, on a different day, fails to show up for work, and the boss calls him to see what happened to him, and the man says, "Reruns of my favorite show came on this morning, and I just had to watch them; I couldn't resist." What do you think the boss is going to say? Is he going to say, "Well, I can't fault you for that, then. After all, you couldn't resist." No, that's ridiculous.

When we choose to do something we are held responsible. And those who do not submit to God's law will be held responsible for their disobedience, their hostility toward God, their rebellion against Him.

And here's where it's important to see the link between inability and unwillingness, which is what Jesus points out in John 5:40. Here it's a different verb. In Romans 8 it was *dunamai*, not able. Here it's the verb *thelo*, not willing, not wanting, not desiring.

And I think recognizing this connection between inability and unwillingness helps us to see more clearly the culpability of unbelief. Someone might hear the teaching about inability and quickly conclude, Well then I'm off the hook. If you're saying that

² Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will*

I can't believe, then I might as well just accept that and go out and do whatever I want.

But here's the thing. You *can't* believe because you don't *want* to believe. You won't come to Jesus because you don't want to come to Jesus. And that makes the situation even worse. It highlights how desperately guilty you are. It reveals how pitifully small and sick and twisted your desires actually are.

Think with me for a moment about the relationship of cannot and will not. We see it in that passage from **Genesis 37** that was read earlier in the service. There's a very interesting statement there about **Joseph's brothers**. Verse 4 says, "But when [Joseph's] brothers saw that their father loved [Joseph] more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him." Do you see what's going on there? Their inability is reflective of their unwillingness. Their jealousy and bitterness made it impossible for them to be kind to or speak well of their brother. It's certainly not that they were physically unable to say nice things about Joseph. If someone held a knife to their throat and demanded they say something kind toward Joseph, they could utter the words. But those deep feelings of hatred would remain unchanged. The moral inability is connected to a deep repulsion inside of them. To act kindly, to speak kindly, of Joseph, would go against a tremendous tidal wave of anger and angst within them. They were unwilling to be kind to him, they didn't have any desire to be kind to him, and thus they were unable to speak peacefully to him.

Last week I caught an insightful statement about inability and unwillingness on a TV comedy of all places. This one lady was signed up to emcee a telethon that was going to be on the local cable network of their small town, to raise money for a charity. And she was trying to get her friends and co-workers to come along and help out—to answer phones and various things. And immediately everyone started rolling their eyes and trying to come up with excuses for why they couldn't be there. But one guy was more honest than the rest. He said, "Oh, I can't come to the telethon because I have absolutely no interest in being there."

Do you see the honesty in that statement? It's not that he's physically unable to be there. It's not that anyone or anything is restraining him from going. But he doesn't want to go, and that amounts to him not being able to go. The unwillingness, the deep aversion, the lack of desire . . . those are the hand-cuffs that keep people in bondage.

Think about this in terms of people rejecting Jesus. Do you understand what this means? It means you will have no excuse when Jesus asks you, Why did you reject me? If you're an unbeliever, which means you are rejecting Jesus, then when He

asks you someday to give an account for your unbelief, you won't have any excuse except to say, I didn't want to come to you. I was unwilling. I had absolutely no interest in the Almighty Son of God, the gracious Savior of the world.

And how does that strike you? Can you picture yourself saying that to Jesus? Yeah, Jesus, I was more interested in human glory. I was more interested in being popular, in getting more applause from people. I was more interested in movies and movie stars and celebrity musicians. I just never really had time for religion.

To say it that way might be very honest and accurate. But can you hear how condemning it would be to have to admit that to Jesus? Just let that sink in. Do you sense the tremendous guilt that is associated with that? Consider how insulting that is to Jesus.

Human Glory vs. God's Glory

Let's close with considering the question, What is it about us—about human beings—that inclines us to be so enamored with mere mortals, to be so interested in ourselves and those like us, instead of being interested, instead of being amazed at the infinite, eternal, Second Person of the Trinity?

And the simple answer that we see Jesus explaining here in verse 44 is that it's all about glory. It's about honor. We want honor and glory for ourselves. We tend to honor and glorify the things that are confined here with us in this world. And we want praise and glory for ourselves, from one another.

Good News! New Birth

The good news about the way Christ saves people from their sin is that He doesn't leave us in that blindness, in that deadness, in that apathy, in that delusion. Apart from Christ we would remain in that delusion, continuing to think that the things of this world are the most glorious things, continuing to strive after glory from one another. But the miracle of regeneration gives us new birth, new life, new eyes, new desires.

Application for Unbelievers

The application in this passage for unbelievers is to recognize how utterly sinful you are. You must realize that your unwillingness to come to Jesus is such a scary place to be. You are rejecting the Savior of the world. You are rejecting the One who will come and judge the world. And you have no excuse whatsoever. You are scorning Him, as you say to Him day after day in the way you live, you are saying to Him, "I have no interest in you. I have no desire to come to You. I'm so much more interested in other things." Friend, my prayer for you this morning is that 1) you would realize that's what you're doing with your life, and 2) that you would make that a confession to Jesus. Confess

that to Him. Say to Him, “I regret that I have made my life all about myself. I regret that I have not taken notice of You like I should and like You deserve. I regret that I have been turning my back on the most glorious Being in the universe and have tried to be happy with such hollow pleasures.” Cry out to Him in that way and ask for mercy.

Remember John 3:16 that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life. Believe in Him today. Come to Him today.

Application for Believers

And for believers, as we reflect on these truths it should make us all the more thankful that He saved us. We never would have come to Him on our own. We never would have become interested in the things of God, and that because of our addiction to self, our addiction to human glory. But He overcame all of that. We’ve been born again. And we’ve been forgiven for those pitiful, insane sins that dishonored Him and kept us in the dark pit of self. Now we’ve been brought out into the light of His glory. Let’s praise Him for that today.