

## CONVINCING WITNESSES TESTIFY

(Jesus Subpoenaed Four Witnesses to Testify to the Truth of His Words)

John 5:31-47 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

In 1859, Joshua Abraham Norton declared himself Emperor of the United States. He wrote to Queen Victoria, asking her to marry him and unite their kingdoms. She refused. Emperor Norton printed his own currency. He wore royal uniforms designed by the best tailors. Those that knew Emperor Norton said, “he looked every inch a king.” The only problem with Joshua Abraham Norton’s reign was that he wasn’t an emperor. We aren’t able to make up who we are.

Around an open fire in a logging camp in Oregon, one logger told the crew, “I saw a wild-eyed bobcat come into camp a few days ago. He walked right up near where we were eating supper around our fire. He was a fierce looking wildcat, so I got up, grabbed a bucket of water, and threw it in his face. That bobcat angrily walked away. Another man sitting at that afternoon fire said, “Gentlemen, I can vouch for the truth of that story. A few minutes after that happened, I was coming down the side of the mountain when I met that wild-eyed bobcat. As has always been my habit, I stopped to stroke its whiskers, and believe me, they were wet.”

This morning we aren’t stopping to think about tall tales, claims that range on lunacy, or fish stories that keep growing. Jesus was speaking with the Pharisees who were doing everything in their power to discount and to destroy the truth of Jesus’ words. They heard Jesus say that He had the power to give life to whomever He desired. They heard Jesus say, “the dead one day will hear My voice.” Jesus knowing all they were thinking, as they thought, “Prove it; show us the evidence that You have been given authority to judge all men, that You are equal with God, and that You have power to raise the dead. Jesus, reading their thoughts, and knowing they were demanding evidence of His words, immediately began to call witnesses to testify to the truth of His words. In our text today, Jesus subpoenaed four witnesses to prove His words were not empty lies, tall tales, or exaggerations. This calling of witnesses Jesus used proceeded in a legal manner as the Pharisees used in their rules of argument to substantiate any claims.

Jesu began His testimony by admitting the universal principal that unsupported evidence by one person alone means the truth of that person’s words cannot be proved. In the Law of Moses, in Deuteronomy 17:6, we read, “On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses, the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness.” Jesus in speaking about dealing with a brother sinning against us, testified in Matthew 18:15-17, saying, “If your brother sins against you, go tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Be certain; that in John 5:31, Jesus was telling the Jews and Pharisees, “If I alone bear witness about Myself, my testimony is not deemed true. But in verse 32, Jesus added, “There is another who bears witness about Me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about Me is true.” As we proceed in this calling of witnesses, Jesus called four witnesses in His defense. Our task this morning is to listen to the four defense witnesses brought before the Pharisees by our Lord. If we receive Jesus’ testimony, there is enough evidence in these seventeen verses to convince the entire world of who Jesus is. I ask you, “Have you accepted Jesus’ testimony? Do you believe His claims that He is equal with God the Father, that He gives life, and that someday soon, the dead will hear His voice prior to the day when Jesus judges all people? Let’s carefully examine the evidence brought by Jesus’ four witnesses. What is the evidence brought forth by these four witnesses?”

**JESUS CALLED TO THE WITNESS STAND JOHN THE BAPTIST TO SUBSTANTIATE HIS CLAIMS.** (I.)

We read in verses 33-35, “You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.” When Jesus first spoke in verse 32 about another witness, Jesus knew the Pharisees were thinking about John the Baptist, so Jesus reading their minds, called John the Baptist to the witness stand. Jesus didn’t call John the Baptist to prove His claims to be true, but rather to use John’s testimony that these Jewish leaders might be saved. Jesus knew the Jews were greatly impressed by John the Baptist, and that they believed him to be a prophet who spoke by revelation from God. Thus, Jesus paid John the Baptist a high tribute by calling him to the witness stand, but in so doing, Jesus rebuked the Jewish leaders.

When Jesus said, in v. 33, “You sent to John,” Jesus was reminding the Jewish leaders of the time when they sent a delegation to him to find out who He was. They remembered John the Baptist testifying that he was not the Christ. Later, John testified that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world. (John 1:29) John also confessed in John 1:32-33, “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on Him... This is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” Jesus’ tribute to John the Baptist had Him call John a burning and a shining lamp, while confessing that He Himself was the true light. (John 1:9) A lamp must be lit, and its wick must be fed with oil. A lamp illumines a limited space for a limited time. But you know, a lamp can burn out, and John now had been imprisoned, and his limited shining was even more limited in prison. Soon God in His sovereignty would allow John the Baptist’s lamp light to be snuffed out as he was beheaded by Herod Antipas.

Yet, for a short time, Jesus reminded the Pharisees that they all were like gnats dancing around a floodlight, or moths milling around a Coleman lamp. The Jews had flocked to the wilderness to hear John’s message and to see John baptize, and many of them were baptized. Yet, the Pharisees, chief priests, scribes, elders, lawyers, Herodians, and Sadducees failed to take John the Baptist seriously.

Instead of repenting and believing, they only flocked to see him. After 400 years of prophetic silence, it was a novelty in Israel to listen to this last of the OT prophets. The Jewish leaders were thrill-seekers, but their lack of repenting, believing and supporting John the Baptist was clearly absent when Herod arrested him. There was no public uprising, no outrage that this prophet was falsely charged, locked up, as no attempt was made to free him. The Jewish enthusiasm over John cooled quickly after he was arrested, as nobody lifted a finger to try to deliver John. The witness of John the Baptist by his burning and shining lamp pointed out clearly who Jesus was, but now by arresting and seeing him beheaded, witness # 1, like the prophets before him, was martyred.

How similar people are today. Crowds rush to hear a popular preacher. Herod Antipas heard Jesus gladly. Many folks love a good sermon. They call it a good performance. I've heard lots of folks tell me they like my preaching because I'm not afraid to preach on hell. When one minister in England in the 1950's, preached on the final judgment, one man said, "Thanks for your sermon. It sure was cute." God's truth is not a truth to be enjoyed and to bring pleasant titillating joy. No, God's truth is to be preached and received with humble repentance. No true man of God wants to be a local celebrity. Jesus knew that for the Jews, His forerunner's message did not lead the Pharisees to receive his message of repentance. The publicans and sinners accepted John's message and repented. The Pharisees would neither submit or repent. Secondly, Jesus subpoenaed another witness.

**JESUS CALLED TO THE WITNESS STAND HIS OWN WORKS TO SUBSTANTIATE HIS CLAIMS.** (II.) We read in verse 36, "But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about Me that the Father has sent Me." Jesus now told the Pharisees that the witness of His own works, given to Him to accomplish and finish by the Father, the witness of His works proved His claims more than the witness of John the Baptist. Jesus was moving closer to the witness of His Father by testifying that His own works were the works God the Father gave Him to do. What works did Jesus mean? His Messianic works, such as the authority to cleanse the temple? Yes! Was He speaking of His miraculous works of healing multitudes of their diseases? Yes! Was Jesus speaking of His spiritual renewing and His giving to men spiritually dead in sin like Nicodemus—regenerating new birth—to be born again? Yes! Was Jesus speaking of His prophecy that God the Father had given Him authority to be the final judge of all people? Yes! All these signs and works were a seal of the Father's approval and were proof positive that God the Father had sent Jesus. Even Jesus' promised claim that the dead would hear His voice and that He would judge all unbelievers was and is proof that the Father gave Jesus final authority to be the Judge at the Great White Throne Judgment. That final judgment then will be the final and convincing witness testifying to all unbelievers that Jesus' claims were and are absolutely true. But now Jesus turned to His Father's testimony, Thirdly,

**JESUS CALLED TO THE WITNESS STAND HIS OWN FATHER TO SUBSTANTIATE HIS CLAIMS.** (III.) We read in verses 37-38, "And the Father

who sent Me has Himself borne witness about Me. 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.” Now Jesus was finally getting to the other witness that He spoke of in John 5:32. The Jewish leaders thought Jesus was speaking of John the Baptist, but this now was where Jesus had originally been going. Now Jesus was giving the testimony of God the Father. Jesus had a word here for secret disciples like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. When He said, “His voice you have never heard, and His form you have never seen, Jesus was telling them He was the voice of God, and that He was the form and express image of God. Hebrews 1:3 tells us Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, and that He upholds the universe by the word of His power. These Jesus’ hating, hostile Jews had failed in unbelief to see in Jesus, the voice, and the form of God.

Jesus went on in verse 38 to tell the Jews that the Father’s Word was not abiding in them. Jesus went on to tell them that the Father’s Word was not abiding in them. He didn’t tell them that they did not have the Word, but rather that the Word did not have them or abide in them. These Jewish scribes sought to know the Word of God, but they did not know the God of the Word. They counted the very letters of the Biblical text, but they missed the spiritual truths that the spiritual truths contained, namely that they did not believe in the One whom the Father sent. If the Father’s word was in their hearts as an abiding presence and possession, they would have placed their faith in the Son commissioned by the Father.

This is terrifying information for all of us today. It shows us how people still read the Word of God with closed minds. These Jewish leaders read the Word of God, not to search for God, and to listen for His voice, but rather to support their own positions and to defend their own beliefs. They didn’t really love God, but they did love their ideas about God. Thus, the Word of the Father did not abide in them. Water had as much chance of soaking into concrete as did the word of the Father to get into the depths of their lives. They did not humbly base their theology on Scripture; rather, as millions do today, they used Scripture to defend a theology they produced themselves. It is still a supreme danger in Bible study. Are we using the Scriptures to prove our beliefs, or to test our beliefs? These Pharisees were picking and choosing in the Word to prove their beliefs, not to test them. Thus, the Jewish leaders missed the greatest Voice, the greatest form, and the greatest Word, though they stood in Christ’s presence, and they held the Word, their scrolls in their very hands, the scrolls that spoke of Jesus. There remains one more witness:

**JESUS CALLED TO THE WITNESS STAND THE HOLY SCRIPTURES TO SUBSTANTIATE HIS CLAIMS.** (IV.)

We read in vs. 39-47 how Jesus pointed the Jews to their own Scriptures, telling them the Scriptures testified of Him. The written Word of God testifies to the Living Word of God in Jesus.” By now in this apologetic sermon of Jesus, the Pharisees realized this was not a time of a “back and forth” discussion. Jesus was going to say what he needed to tell them, and they had better listen. Today, if we are honest, we get in such a hurry racing from one subject to another, we often fail to slow down to hear what God is

saying to us. As I was listening to YNOP on Friday morning, I listened to a lady author who spoke about trying to get her 10-year-old daughter to get to sleep. The Mom was impatiently telling her to go to sleep, when the little girl said, “Mom, when you get impatient and in a hurry like you are, I can’t talk to you. Why don’t you slow down and settle down in your soul?” Finally, when the Mother came back in the room, she sat down beside her daughter and said, “What’s keeping you awake, honey?” Her daughter said, “My teacher today said I was stupid.” That was a conversation that was deeply in need of having with her daughter. So, I say to us all on this last witness of the Scriptures, slow down in your mind and settle down in your soul. We all need this last witness Jesus called to the witness stand. This final witness contains seven challenges Jesus gave to the Pharisees:

**Your searching the Scripture (1) is in vain.** Notice v. 39. Jesus said, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that bear witness of Me.” Jesus was saying, “You have the law, the psalms, and the prophets but they profit you nothing, because you do not see Me in them.” The Old Testament and the New are closed books if Christ is not the central figure throughout the 66 books. Christ unlocks the mystery of the Bible. To read the Word and not see Jesus is to miss the Word and truly not to have read it at all.

**Your blindness (2) is because of your unwilling hearts.** Notice v. 40, “Yet you refuse to come to Me that you may have life.” Blindness is hard-hearted-none so blind as those who will not see.

**Your praise I will not accept (3) for your do not love God if you don’t love Me.** Notice v. 41-42. “I do not receive glory from people. But I know that you do not have the love of God within you.” Jesus was saying, “As long as you do not have the love of God in you, your praise is unacceptable. Praise to God without a heart of love for God is totally unacceptable to God. This is still true in our worship today, because many love to sing beautiful music who don’t love God.

**Your lack of love for God (4) is proved by the false teaching and false teachers you accept.** Notice v. 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.” Gamaliel, one of their teachers of the law reminded the Jewish leaders, Acts 5:36-37 that some of them followed Theudas, a false Jewish messiah, and others followed Judas, the Galilean. Paul spoke in II Thess. 2:8-10 about those following false messiahs with “false signs and wonders” with their wicked deception for those hating the truth.

**Your refusal to believe in Jesus (5) is that you seek men’s praise, not God’s.** Notice v.44. “How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another, and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?”- These are those seeking good-ol’-boy glory, not God’s. John Calvin said, “The door of faith is shut against all whose minds are filled with a vain desire for earthly glory.” J. C. Ryle said, “If a person secretly cherishes any idol more than God’s praise, he will go on to the end of his days dissatisfied and restless, and will never find the way to peace.”

**Your accuser is not Me, but Moses. (6) on whom legalists set their hope.** Listen to v. 45-46. “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. 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.”—Deuteronomy 18:15-18. Frederick Godet once said, “Every true disciple of Moses is on the way to becoming a Christian, (a disciple of Christ) and every unbelieving Jew is on the way towards rejecting the Gospel.

**You will never believe My words (7) for you really do not believe the writings of Moses.** Jesus said, v. 47, “But if you do not **believe** his writings, how will you believe My words?” The amazing fact is that in Matthew, believe is used 11 times, in Mark, 14 times, in Luke, 9 times, and in John’s Gospel—98 times, the verb believe is used. Jesus reminded the Pharisees that their view that nothing was as sacred as the Torah—1st 5 books of the Law. They placed Moses’ words above all others and saw him as your chief leader. Yet Jesus was telling these Jewish leaders, having the Scripture was their greatest privilege, but their greatest condemnation. For those Jewish leaders as for millions today—as we in America, have Bibles in all our homes. The more chances we have to know Jesus, the more we’re condemned if we fail to know Him. Amen.