
Whose Truth?

John 7:1-24

Pastor Russ Kennedy

In this we find a swirl of controversy around Jesus. What is Jesus really about? Why is He so much about truth?

The Feast of Tabernacles or Booths was the celebration of the harvest of olives and grapes. This was the most popular of Jewish feasts. Vast crowds flooded into Jerusalem. What an opportunity to get in front of crowds who were passionate about God and who had come a long way for this annual festival. Once, again Jesus is going to surprise us.

Why? Because we have really come to believe that we own the truth. We get to determine what is true and what parts of truth we are going to believe. Today, in our post-modern thinking, truth is not even something “out there”. Truth is what the group, the community, the interpreter says it is. There may be an ultimate truth, but we cannot know it. We can only approximate it.

Well, Jesus isn't going to let us go our merry way. He is going to ask us a very important question today. “Whose truth is it after all?”

Not for Personal Ambition

(v. 1-9)

First, God's truth is not to be used in the service our personal agendas or ambitions. We see this in the scheming skepticism of Jesus' brothers.

¹ After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill him. ² Now the Jews' Feast of Booths was at hand. ³ So his brothers said to him, “Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing.” ⁴ For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.” ⁵ For not even his brothers believed in him. ⁶ Jesus said to them, “My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. ⁷ The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil. ⁸ You go up to the feast. I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come.” ⁹ After saying this, he remained in Galilee.

Jesus is now beginning to live in danger for His life. John points out for us that He would no longer go about in Judea because there were plots against His life. These were not imagined or exaggerated; they were a real, growing threat that eventually led to His betrayal, arrest and death.

Jesus' natural born brothers see the holiday festival as an opportunity for Jesus to promote Himself. John here records that they think his strategy is bad. If He intends to have people listen to what He has to say and to follow Him, then He has got to stop hiding out in private. He needs to get out in front of the crowds.

Now, this strategy led to all kinds of trouble. In chapter 6 alone, Jesus' feeding a vast crowd led to an attempt to force Him to be king. Jesus responded by teaching on the bread of life. It seems that His brothers had seen how effective Jesus' public miracles had been to get the crowds to follow Him and they don't get why He isn't doing that any more.

John tells us why they think that this strategy will work: they don't believe in Him. What? That's right. They don't believe that He is who He says He is and so, this unbelief expresses itself in a cynical, skeptical scheme. They would have Him moving around in public in spite of the dangers.

Jesus responds with, "My time has not yet come." Interesting statement. It is not yet time to go to the feast? To die? To rule? It is always their time because they are in the world and think like the world. The world would never hate them. But the world hates Jesus. He is giving them cause to hate Him. He is telling them the truth about their sin. Telling people the truth about sin will not make you popular. It will just make you faithful.

So He sends them on while He remains in Galilee.

Will Cause Division

(v. 10-13)

God's truth will cause division. We see this in the troubling division among the people.

¹⁰ But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private. ¹¹ The Jews were looking for him at the feast, and saying, "Where is he?" ¹² And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, "He is a good man," others said, "No, he is leading the people astray." ¹³ Yet for fear of the Jews no one spoke openly of him.

Jesus is not going to serve His brother's agenda, but He is going to the festival. So He goes up later alone and in private.

And just as He thought and as John records, the Jews are hunting for Him. They are not just looking for Him; this group of religious leaders are trying to find Him hoping to deal with Him. John uses this term, "the Jews" to refer to Jesus' enemies. They have gone now from questioning Him to seeking to hunt Him down. They are continually asking at the feast, "Where is He? Have you seen Him? Tell us if you have?"

The people are divided. Some see Him as a good man. He heals, provides, teaches. Others see His teaching as leading people astray. This muttering is going on behind closed doors and in whispered conversations in corners and over coffee. The enemies of Jesus, by going around and publicly searching for Him in the crowds, are intimidating the people. They are afraid of them and their power. But they are still having to decide what they think about Jesus.

I know you may be thinking that this is strange. You are used to thinking of Jesus as this loving teacher who went around doing good. He was kind to all. He taught brotherly love and compassion on the unfortunate. Yes, He loved people. He had mercy on the sick, halt blind, and lame. He moved in His Father's will and with the Spirit's power to heal.

But He spoke the truth, regardless. He said what needed to be said. Jesus' teaching caused and will cause division. People will have to decide what they think about what they are being told. Particularly, the truth about Jesus will divide. It will divide believers from unbelievers. It may divide families. It will cause comment, murmuring, trouble and possibly even persecution.

Now, the division should not be because of the manner of the truth, but because of the message of the truth. We should not be causing division because of the way it is said. It is possible to speak the truth not in love. Truth divides over its content, what it says, declares, affirms and denies. The truth about Jesus will cause division: some will believe and be saved. Others will reject the truth and in rejecting the truth, reject Jesus. They will continue on the road of condemnation that will end in damnation.

By Christ's Authority

(v. 14-24)

Here is the fundamental question everyone has to answer. It is shown to us in the admonishing confrontation by the Lord.

¹⁴ About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began teaching. ¹⁵ The Jews therefore marveled, saying, "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" ¹⁶ So Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. ¹⁷ If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. ¹⁸ The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood.

At this point our Lord appeared at the temple, and it was a brilliant appearance. In brief, our Lord came into the temple and began to teach, and people realized that no one had ever taught like this. When they questioned him about it, he said, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me" (v. 16). He then accused them of being out to kill him. They responded by saying he had a demon or at least seemed to be a bit paranoid. With that, our Lord really set things in motion. (Hughes, p.214)

In the Place of His Teaching

(v. 14)

John wants us to see the interplay between the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus teaching in the Temple and Jesus as the dwelling or tabernacle of God. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

So here is Jesus, the tabernacle of God displaying the full of grace and truth glory. He is standing in the Temple of Jewish worship which is empty of the glory of God. He stands to teach on the day of a Jewish feast meant to point to His coming. Jesus is the "who" of this festival. He is its full and final fulfillment.

In the Response to His Teaching

(v. 15)

They are amazed at His learning. He has not studied at any of the seminaries of His day. He has not been schooled by some famous Rabbi. Yet, His teaching amazed them. His grasp of Scripture and His ability to exposit it were way beyond what they were used to hearing from the ordinary traveling rabbi of their day. But from who this is, "the Jews" and from Jesus' answer to them, we know that this is not just "wow" factor. This is a how question. This is a "how is it possible" question. This is not the happy surprise of faith. This is the hard eyed challenge of doubt and disbelief.

In the Weight of His Teaching

(v. 16-18)

Here it is. *Jesus' teaching is not His own*. It is not His own personal, private understanding. His teaching is not simply one rabbinical interpretation among others. His teaching is not documented and underscored at every point by citing others. His teaching is authoritative. He is authoritative. It is from the Father who sent Him. His understanding, interpretation and exposition of the Scripture are final. They are laced with "Truly, truly, *I* say to you..."

Who is going to accept this authoritative teaching as being from God? Those *who are inclined to do God's will*. Too many people come to hear God's Word in a mere pursuit of knowledge. If you do this, you will struggle with the authority of the Word. You will want to know what the Bible says but not necessarily to submit to what the Bible says.

Hear me well. There is a kind of coming to the preaching and teaching of God's Word that does not please God. It will want the parsing of the Greek and Hebrew, the weighing out of every word, the holding forth on all the various interpretations of the text. There is a coming to the text that is bent to challenge the understanding and interpretation. This is not being "a Berean Christian". The Berean Jews were more noble because they "received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." (Acts 17:11) Their nobility was in their willingness to receive, to submit, to learn God's Word. That bent of their hearts expressed itself in personal study aimed not a challenging Paul but at confirming what they heard. You are not being noble if you come prepared *to argue* with what you hear. You are being noble like those wonderful Christians when you come prepared *to accept* what you hear. You will know if your heart is willing to do God's will if you take what you hear and with eager self-study in the Scriptures, you confirm what you hear.¹⁰

Why is this so? Listen again to verse 18.

¹⁸ The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood.

Jesus is here contrasting two kinds of teachers and teaching.

There are those who are seeking their own glory and thus will speak with personal authority. Even moderns who do not believe that there is a true interpretation will insist that this is so – this is authoritative.

There are those who are seeking the glory of God and speak the truth. But more than that, there is One in whom is no falsehood, who teaches the truth and thus glorifies God. This One is the Lord Jesus.

Jesus establishes for them and for us an inseparable connection between glory and authority. One of the ways you can tell true teaching is by who they promote. Whose agenda and glory is being served and treasured and put front and center. This is the melodic line through this text. Only Jesus's teaching has authority because only Jesus is promoting the Father's glory. Jesus' brothers are not promoting the Father's glory. The Jews are not promoting the Father's glory.

How do we know that? Because of what follows...

In the Accusations by His Teaching

(v. 19-24)

¹⁹ Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?" ²⁰ The crowd answered, "You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?" ²¹ Jesus answered them, "I did one work, and you all marvel at it. ²² Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. ²³ If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well? ²⁴ Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."

His audience thinks of themselves as people who are obeying God. They have Moses' Law. They are here at this festival doing God's will. They think they are happily obeying God. Yet none – do you see it, NOT ONE, is keeping God's law. They are all law breakers. This is the truth. All the while, some of them are preparing to commit murder. This no ordinary homicide they are planning. This is theo-cide.

But they are offended. "You're insane. Who is trying to kill you?" Well, they should know. Maybe they don't but John has been emphatic in the opening of this section – the Jews were going about seeking to kill Jesus. So, He speaks the truth. He does not have a demon – He is not insane. This accusation hits right on the mark.

Jesus brings them back to the Scripture. He points out their hypocrisy and their disobedience. The Jews were seeking to kill Him because He had healed a sick man on the Sabbath. He had told the sick man to pick up his bed and walk. Both of these were “gross” violations of the Sabbath rules. Now they were not violations of the Sabbath as God intended. Notice how Jesus challenges them and us:

They attributed circumcision to the Law. But circumcision as a mark, a sign, of the descendants of Abraham began with Abraham. It predated the giving of the Law. Yet circumcision was being treated as though it were only in the Law.

They allowed circumcision on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic Covenant. So if the 8th day after birth happened to fall on the Sabbath, circumcision was allowed and was not breaking the Sabbath.

Yet, Jesus was condemned to healing on the Sabbath.

Their judgment, their condemnation was hypocritical and external. They were judging by the way it appeared on the surface. They were not evaluating on truth.

Jesus’ declaration and accusation are on His authority. That authority is because the truth He says is not His own; it is His Father’s. Those who are poised to obey the truth will have the proper discernment to recognize it. But all discernment in regards to the truth must answer to the Scripture.

Reflect and Respond

So, what is the point of all this?

Do you understand and believe that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Feast of Tabernacles? Do you believe that Jesus is the dwelling of God, is God Himself, full of God’s glory? Do you then see Him as full of grace and truth?

Do you come to hear God’s Word taught with a heart inclined to obey? The key to understanding the Bible is not pursuing knowledge but willingness to obey God.

Do you come to sit under and be submissive to God’s Word? Is your listening to sermons marked more by judging the message than being judged by the message?

So, are you prepared to submit to the truth when you hear it? That, my beloved, is the beginning of saving belief.

Notes

¹⁰ Pastor Dale Evans taught on this text a few months ago. His teaching on this text was clear and helpful. I commend that sermon to you.