

## **John 5:16–30**

### **Introduction**

Last week we came to a new “section” of John where Jesus’ conflict with “the Jews” becomes suddenly very pronounced – with the Jews “persecuting” and even “seeking to kill” Jesus. It’s in the context of this conflict that the question of who Jesus is and of His unique relationship to the Father is “fleshed out” in its fullness and beauty. J.C. Ryle says of our text this morning:

“These verses begin one of the most deep and solemn passages in the four Gospels. They show us the Lord Jesus asserting His own Divine nature, His unity with God the Father, and the high dignity of His office. Nowhere does our Lord dwell so fully on these subjects as in the chapter before us. And nowhere, we must confess, do we find out so thoroughly the weakness of man’s understanding! There is much, we must all feel, that is far beyond our comprehension in our Lord’s account of Himself. Such knowledge, in short, is too wonderful for us. ‘It is high: we cannot attain unto it.’ (Psalm 89:6) How often men say that they want clear explanations of such doctrines as the Trinity. Yet here we have our Lord handling the subject of His own Person, and, behold! We cannot follow Him. We seem only to touch His meaning with the tip of our fingers.”

And yet this morning if we can only touch His meaning with the tip of our fingers that by itself will be enough to occupy our minds and hearts for all eternity.

John “sets the stage” with the account of the healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda. Not only does the spiritual blindness of the lame man prepare us for the spiritual blindness of the Jews, but the fact that his healing takes place on the Sabbath sets us up for why the Jews were persecuting and seeking to kill Jesus. We begin in verse 16 of chapter five:

**I. John 5:16** — And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath.

What things was Jesus doing on the Sabbath? The last thing we knew the Jews were telling the lame man that it wasn’t lawful for him to carry his mat on the Sabbath. But now the focus shifts from what the lame man was doing to what Jesus was doing. Not only did Jesus *tell* the lame man to pick up his mat and carry it home but now the emphasis seems to be on the fact that Jesus had healed a man on the Sabbath. And that’s apparently not *all* that Jesus did on the Sabbath. John says, “because He was doing *these things* on the Sabbath.” The point now isn’t just the healing of the lame man, but a general pattern in Jesus’ ministry. He was *always* “working” on the Sabbath. And this is why, John says, the Jews were (always) persecuting Jesus. It’s with this in mind that John introduces Jesus’ “answer” to the constant accusations of the Jews.

**II. John 5:17** — But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”

Jesus doesn’t at this point enter into any debate with the Jews about the legitimacy of their interpretation and application of the Sabbath commandment. Not directly. Instead, he taps into a

discussion that they themselves had been having for many years. Genesis 2 says that *God rested* on the 7<sup>th</sup> day (Gen. 2:1-3). The fourth commandment said that God's people were also to rest on the 7<sup>th</sup> day as a sign of God's purpose that they should share with Him *in His rest* (Exod. 20:8-11). So the question the Jews came to ask was this: "Is there any sense in which God is still working?" Or better: "Is there ever a single moment when it can truly be said that God is not working?" If God really ever ceased from all His activity of sustaining, and preserving, and governing wouldn't the result be total chaos? If God ever stopped "working" wouldn't the result be the dissolution not just of the creation, but specifically of all His redeeming and saving purposes for His people? The Jews rightly concluded from these things that there was a real sense in which God was always working (without, of course, being guilty of breaking the Sabbath or contradicting the reality of His "*rest*").

So Jesus begins here by agreeing with the conclusion that the Jews had come to: "My Father," He says, "is working until now." But what's the point of saying this when the Jews already agreed? Well, the Jews knew that Jesus was talking about "*God*," but how would they have understood the way Jesus referred to God as "*My Father*"? How are *we* to understand this?

"*My Father* is working," Jesus says, "*until now*." His point isn't that God is about to stop working, but rather that He has in some sense been working since the beginning of creation even up until that very moment—sustaining, preserving, and governing the whole created order ultimately for the purpose of carrying forward His "work" of redeeming and saving.

"*My Father* is working until now," Jesus says, "**and I** am working." The "I" is emphatic in the Greek and it's actually combined with the word "and" [*kago*]: "**and I** am working." Never was any "and" more fraught with meaning than this one. Even if Jesus is "working" on the Sabbath, He is justified in doing this work because it is, after all, "His own Father" who "works" without ceasing. It's because His own Father works unceasingly that Jesus, too, is working without ceasing – "working" even on the Sabbath. "*My Father* is *working until now*, and *I am working*." Is there some sense, then, in which we can "appreciate" what we go on to read in verse eighteen?

**III. John 5:18** — 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.

The Jews would have had no problem referring to God as the Father of Israel, or as "our Father." Even referring to God as "my Father" wouldn't necessarily have been unheard of. But Jesus was speaking of God as "his own Father" in a way that no one else had ever done before – because no one else could ever have conceived of doing so. Jesus spoke of God as if in some fundamental sense He was *only His* Father. We know this because Jesus was justifying *His own unceasing activity (even working on the Sabbath)* on the grounds that it was "*His own Father*" ("*My Father*") who was also engaged in unceasing activity (working even on the Sabbath). So when Jesus speaks of "My Father" He's not just describing a loving covenant relationship (like the kind God had with Israel or that God has with us). What Jesus is claiming is an identity of nature that He shares in common with "His own" Father. This is why the Jews were absolutely right to understand that Jesus was making Himself *equal* with God. They hadn't misunderstood Jesus or heard Him say something He didn't intend to say, or jumped to the wrong conclusion as some

unbelieving scholars today would have us believe. In the first place, we hear for ourselves what Jesus said. In the second place, it wasn't just the unbelieving Jews who heard Jesus making Himself equal with God, but even the Apostle John himself, who writes: "...because not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God *his own Father*, making Himself equal with God." Is it coming home to you now that we dare not treat this claim lightly or casually? This isn't just a proposition for us to argue about or to prove or to preach, but a claim that if true offers everything to us and demands everything from us.

Of course, for the unbelieving Jews, Jesus wasn't rightfully claiming anything, but blasphemously presuming. Notice the language John uses: "because He was *making Himself* equal with God." That could be taken in a "neutral" sense of implying clearly by His words that He was equal with God. On the other hand, it could be taken to mean that Jesus was arrogantly and presumptuously "*making himself* equal *with* God" – as though He were setting Himself up *next* to God as a *second* God. It's this *presumption* that the Jews heard—wrongly—in Jesus' words. And this is why they were seeking all the more to kill him – because here was the most narcissistic, egomaniacal, self-exalting, and blasphemous man they had ever met. But the Jews were severely mistaken – blinded by their own sin and self-righteousness. They hadn't *really understood* Jesus' words.

**IV. John 5:19–20** — So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord [from himself], but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel."

Notice how Jesus refers to Himself now in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person as "the Son" and of God as "the Father." What He's going to do, now, is unveil something of the nature of this Father-Son relationship and therefore something of the *true* nature of His "equality with God."

"The Son," He says, "can do nothing of his own accord [lit. 'He can do nothing from Himself'], but only what he sees the Father doing." And the only reason that He sees what the Father is doing is because "the Father loves the Son and shows him all that He Himself is doing." Jesus forbids in the strongest language ("truly, truly, I say to you") any thought that He is the one who has presumptuously set Himself up *next to* God, arrogantly "making Himself" equal with God as another God. Instead, there is in these words an all-permeating *submission* and "*subordination*" of the Son to the Father and an absolute *dependence* of the Son upon the Father. And it's only *in* this very *subordination* and *dependence* of the Son in relationship to the Father that we can understand truly Jesus' **equality** with God. The true identity and sameness of nature that the Son has with "His own" Father is revealed in the infinite perfections of His subordination to and dependence upon the Father.

Listen again to what Jesus says: "The Son can do *nothing* from Himself, but *only* what he sees the Father doing. For *whatever* the Father does, *that* the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him *all* that he himself is doing." The Son doesn't mimic or copy what His Father does like a child today might copy his human father. Instead, whatever the Father is doing, *that is* what the Son is doing. The Son doesn't see the Father creating, sustaining, and governing the world and then mimic that work by creating, sustaining, and governing His own

separate world, or even by “helping” the Father in some “separate” capacity. The Son doesn’t see the Father calling and redeeming a covenant people and then mimic that work by calling and redeeming His own separate people, or even by “helping” the Father in some “separate” capacity. “The Son can do nothing,” Jesus says, “from Himself.” Instead, what the Father is doing *is itself* what the Son is doing.

Furthermore, *whatever* the Son is doing *is always* what the Father is doing and *all* that the Father does, the Son does because “the Father loves the Son and *shows Him all* that He Himself is doing”—so that nothing the Son does is ever “from Himself.” Are you seeing how the full “equality” and “oneness” is actually *made manifest and revealed in* the submission of the Son to the Father? It’s this identity and sameness of *activity* in the context of this perfect subordination and absolute dependence that reveals the identity and sameness of *nature* – the true equality of the Son with *His own* Father.

What does this tell us, then, about the nature of the things that Jesus is doing? The Jews knew from the Scriptures that the work of the Father was revealed in His work of saving and redeeming. Even His work of sustaining and governing the world is directed to that end of saving and redeeming His covenant people. The Jews knew this to be the “work” of the Father even though in many ways this work had remained hidden in the secret councils of God. But now when Jesus says that the Son does only what He sees the Father doing, what does this tell us about what the Son is doing? What does this tell us about the meaning of Jesus’ healing of the lame man *even on the Sabbath*? The healing of the lame man *even on the Sabbath* is a manifestation of that one great truth that the saving work and activity of the Father is now being *visibly revealed and made manifest to us* in the work and activity of the Son.

“The Father loves the Son and shows him all that *He Himself* is doing. And greater works than these will he show him [greater works than ones such as the healing of the lame man will the Father show the Son], so that you may marvel [so that you may marvel when you see these previously hidden “greater works” of the Father visibly revealed and made manifest in the work of the Son]. And what are these greater works?

**V. John 5:21** — For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.

None of the Jews would have marveled that the Father raises the dead and gives them life. The song of Hannah celebrates this very thing:

➤ 1 Samuel 2:6 — The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

Hannah was using poetic language and probably wasn’t thinking of literal resurrection, but the principle is clearly expressed. The power of life and death belongs only to the LORD – to God who is the Father of Israel. When Naaman the Syrian came to the king of Israel with a letter from his master asking that the king heal Naaman of his leprosy, the king responded:

➤ 2 Kings 5:7 — Am I God, to kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?

It was the Lord God Himself who said in Deuteronomy:

- Deuteronomy 32:39 — 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 then in Ezekiel, it's the Lord God Himself who speaks of this future day:

- 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.

None of the Jews would have marveled that the Father raises the dead and gives them life, but what they *should* marvel at was that just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son, incarnate in human flesh, would visibly reveal and make known this very work by Himself doing this work that the Father does and that the Father has shown to Him – by Himself giving life *to whom He will*. Jesus has already said that the Son can do nothing “from Himself,” therefore when the Son gives life “to whom He will” we conclude that the will of the Son is in perfect conformity to, and the perfect expression of, the will of the Father (cf. Jn. 5:30; 21:22; Lk. 22:42 does not contradict, but reinforces this truth). There is here a perfect identity of **activity** rooted in a perfect identity of **will** rooted in a perfect identity and sameness of **nature**, all of which is *expressed* in those infinite perfections of the Son's *subordination to* and *dependence upon* the Father.

Notice that this “work” of raising the dead and giving them life was in some sense a work that the Father had not yet done (salvation-historical) because it was a work that the Father had not yet shown the Son (“greater works than these *will* He show Him”; future tense). People had been raised from the dead in the past, but only to die again. People had been given spiritual life in the past, but the true substance and source of that life had not been revealed. It was only when the Father would “show” the Son this work that the Son would then *do Himself this very work* that He saw the *Father doing* – by *Himself* giving life “to whom He wills.” It's in this way that the *incarnate* Son makes perfectly visible not just the previously hidden “work” of the Father, but even the invisible Father Himself. This explains how Jesus can say in verses 22-23:

**VI. John 5:22–23** — For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.

We dishonor and blaspheme the Father if we think for a moment that one who does not share fully with Him in His own nature can in any way be honored *with Him*—honored “just as” the Father is honored. But if this is the case then, as Jesus says, we also dishonor and blaspheme the Father whenever we fail to honor the Father *by* honoring the Son whom He has *sent* (and to whom He has *given* all judgment) with that self-same honor that belongs to the Father.

Are you beginning to see, here, the true oneness of God? And are you beginning to see that the doctrine of the Trinity—of the *tri-unity* of God—is not just a proposition, but something bound up with the true knowledge and worship of God? So one commentator writes:

- “The point at issue is that the *one* God can be known and honored in no other way than in the Son and that *only in the revelation of the Son is the oneness of God manifest in its utter uniqueness*. The inseparability of the adoration of the Father from that of the Son prohibits any notion that ‘next to’ and ‘besides’ God as Father, the Son as ‘a second party’ must be honored as God. For *by giving all things into the hands of the Son, the Father does not retreat to a position behind the Son, but posits himself as present in the Son*. God is not two [or three] but one. But *at the same time and for the same reason* he can and will be known in no way other than *in the Son* and thus honored by all who know and honor him as God and *Father*.” (Ridderbos)

This is why the God who is a “jealous” God (Exod. 34:14) and who gives His glory to no other (Isa. 42:8; 48:11) can say that it is His will that “at the name of Jesus *every knee should bow...* and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is *Lord, to the glory of God the Father* (Phil. 2:9-11). The Father is not dishonored but is only truly honored when the Son is honored with that self-same honor that belongs to the Father – the Son whom He loves and to whom He shows *all* that He Himself is doing in order that the Son—***even the Son incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ***—might do those very works that He sees the Father doing, even raising the dead and giving them life. And so it’s once again in this way that the incarnate Son makes visible not just the previously hidden “work” of the Father, but even the invisible Father Himself. This is why Jesus can say in John chapter fourteen:

- John 14:1 — Believe in God [the Father]; believe also in me.

This is why Jesus can go on to say in verse twenty-four:

**VII. John 5:24** — Truly, truly, **I** say to you, 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.

Notice how Jesus suddenly comes back to the 1<sup>st</sup> person, speaking of Himself no longer as “him” or “he” or “the Son” but once again as “I” and “me” and “my.” *Here*, in the person of Jesus, *is* the **Son**. The goal of this “exposition” of the “oneness” of God as Father and Son was to call the Jews to honor **the Father** *by* honoring **the Son** whom the Father had sent into the world and who was even now speaking these words (“I... my... me”). The goal of this “exposition” of the “oneness” of God as Father and Son is still to call us to honor the Father *by* honoring the Son who is now incarnate in Jesus Christ (“I... my... me”).

Notice how Jesus says, “Whoever *hears [receives]* **My** word **AND** *believes* **Him** who sent Me.” Do you see, now, the profoundly intimate relationship between these two things? To **hear** and **receive** the word of *Jesus*, the Son, *is in and of itself* to **believe** *the one who sent Him*. To hear and receive the word of Jesus, the Son, *is* what it **means** to believe the Father who sent Him. And so it’s this “hearing” and this “believing” that Jesus is calling us to in this revelation of the “oneness” of God in order that we might have eternal life – in order that we might know that we will never come into judgment, but that we have passed already from death to life. Quoting again the commentator I quoted earlier, “Only in the revelation of the Son [and of the Son’s relationship with the Father] is the oneness of God manifest in its utter uniqueness” and also

(borrowing from the Baptist Confession) as the unshakable “foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence [upon] Him.”

This doctrine of the oneness of God—as it can only be seen in the Father loving the Son and showing Him *all* that He Himself is doing and the Son never doing anything “from Himself,” but only and always doing the very works that He sees the Father doing—this doctrine is not intended simply to convince us intellectually of faith in Jesus’ name. It’s intended to call forth from us the response of our whole person in a truly *humble* faith, a truly *reverent* faith, a truly *joyful* faith, a truly *obedient* faith. This doctrine of the oneness of God is revealed so that we might have eternal life with all the fruits of that vital and active principle of life abiding within us—so that we might know that we will never come into judgment, but that we have passed already out of death into life. And so Jesus goes on to say in verses 25-30 (verses that we’ll come back to next week):

**VIII. John 5:25–30** — Truly, truly, I say to you, **an hour is coming, and is now here**, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has **granted** the Son also to have life in himself. And he has **given** him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for **an hour is coming** when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. **I can do nothing on my own [from myself]. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.**