

Credentials vs Qualifications

Sunday AM

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It has been said that one of the holiest moments in life is that brief moment of silence right before we open the word of God. In just a moment we're going to be challenged, hopefully we're going to be convicted by what his words communicate to us, but today is one of those days where it's real easy to read this story and to presume that this takes place in those days with those people. In fact, it's easy to point the proverbial finger and say, "If I were not or if I had been there in those days, I would not have asked the questions they did. I would not have had the critical spirit that they did." So today, I want us to pray that we will come to this passage not as a condemnation to those who went before us, but as a challenge to us today not to follow in their footsteps.

Let's pray.

Lord, as we enter that time, that holy moment right before we open your word, Lord, we confess, Lord, that these are not just opinions or ideas or philosophies of a day gone by, Lord, these are you words meant to speak to our lives and our situation and our relationships and our struggles and our pains and our doubts. So God, I pray that you would help us today not see this as a story about somebody else somewhere else, Lord, if necessary help us to see that this is our story today. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to the Gospel of John 7. As you're turning to John 7, if you're a first time guest or visitor with us, we are slowly and steadily making our way through the Gospel of John with the eventual purpose of chapter 15, where there Jesus makes this statement, he says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him shall bear much fruit for apart from me you can do nothing." So as we make this journey, today we find ourselves in chapter 7. We're at the feast of tabernacles. This is an annual celebration of the Jewish community where they celebrated God tabernacling or dwelling with his people.

As we discussed last week, this was mandatory for all of the men in the Jewish community to be a part of this celebration. That's critical to today's passage because all of the representatives of the families of Israel would have been there and yet we find a discussion, better than that, we find a conversation, a questioning of Jesus by those who disputed with him and doubted the identity that he claimed to possess. And today what

we're going to do is look at what I believe is the distinct difference between possessing credentials and qualifications.

Now, allow me to elaborate before we go to John 7. Some years ago, I had the distinct privilege of serving on the Credentials Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention. Now, you're asking, "What is that and what did y'all do?" Well, when we gather annually for the Southern Baptist Convention, pastors and lay folks from all over the country, one of the things that we do is make sure that everybody that is supposed to be there is there, and we register in advance and there are multiple reasons for doing this. 1. We want to make sure that everybody who is registered on behalf of their church, we want to make sure that they have the possibility and the opportunity to cast a vote in the business meetings, so we just want to make sure everybody is there. Secondly, there are those who desire to come in with not such a pure intent, shall we say, they want to disrupt the gathering, they want to make a spectacle of things, and you just make sure that everybody that's there is supposed to be there. With that being said, our task, myself and these other individuals, we're to sit behind a desk and if you arrived and you had not pre-registered and you did not have the proper identification, they sent you to us to make sure that you were eligible to be there and we gave your balance and such.

Well, it just so happened one evening that a man and his wife showed up and this was the individual who was the President of the seminary that I graduated from, and it just so happens that in the task of his busy schedule he had not pre-registered, he had forgotten his identification and so he had to come through the Credentials Committee to get into a convention of which he was one of the speakers in. This was a man who I had played golf with. This is a man I had played racket ball with. This was a man who knew me by my first name and yet I had to say, "Sir, did you bring proper identification?" You see, I knew that he was beyond qualified to walk into that room, however and for some right reasons, there had been some credentials that had been set up, some man-made stipulations to ensure that the process would go through flawlessly. You see, we understand today that there are a lot of people who have credentials that honestly are not very qualified, and there are people who are qualified but may not possess credentials.

Today as we come to John 7, there is a group of people who are frustrated with Jesus because even though – listen – they cannot dismiss his qualifications, they would like for him to possess some very specific credentials. Beginning in chapter 7, verse 14, it says,

14 Now about the midst of the feast [this is tabernacles] Jesus went up into the temple, and taught. 15 And the Jews marvelled, saying, How does this man know letters, having never learned? 16 Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. 17 If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself. 18 He that speaketh of himself seeks his own glory: but he that seeks his glory that sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him. 19 Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you keeps the law? Why go ye about to kill me? 20 The people answered and said, You have a devil: who goes about to kill you? 21 Jesus

answered and said unto them, I have done one work, and yet you all marvel. 22 Moses therefore gave unto you circumcision; (not because it is of Moses, but of the fathers;) and you on the sabbath day circumcise a man. 23 If a man on the sabbath day receive circumcision, that the law of Moses should not be broken; are you angry at me, because I have made a man every whit whole on the sabbath day? 24 Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment. 25 Then said some of them of Jerusalem, Is not this he, whom they seek to kill? 26 But, lo, he speaks boldly, and they say nothing unto him. Do the rulers know indeed that this is the very Christ? 27 Howbeit we know this man where he is: but when Christ comes, no man knows where he is. 28 Then cried Jesus in the temple as he taught, saying, You both know me, and you know where I am: and I am not come of myself, but he that sent me is true, whom you know not. 29 But I know him: for I am from him, and he has sent me.

So in the midst of this celebration, the midst of this festival, where they are desiring the things of God, we have this situation where a group of people pulled Jesus aside and they began to question him based on what their opinion is on the credentials that he should possess in order to qualify to be the person who he claims to be.

The first credential that they throw out there is the credential of his pedigree. Notice what they say, "How does this man have letters but he has never learned?" Let me tell you about the assumption that these individuals are making. They're assuming that if Jesus didn't learn under the same rabbi as they did, if Jesus didn't go to the same school as they did, and if Jesus did not have the same piece of paper on the wall as they did, then obviously he does not know what he's talking about and you should listen to somebody who has the proper schooling, proper education and the proper pedigree.

Now, what I'm about to say, if this is somewhat offensive, please forgive me in advance, but we're dealing with spiritual matters here. We're dealing with doctrinal biblical issues and I've met a lot of folks who have no formal education whatsoever and they know the word of God. I've met folks who have never spent a single day in college, much less graduate school, and they know the person of God, they know the things of God, and they know the word of God, and I've met a lot of folks who've got a lot of graduate degrees and they are clueless when it comes to the things of God. And that's what we're seeing happen in this passage. We've got people with lots of pieces of paper on the wall saying, "Hey, this guy didn't go to our school. Why should we listen to him?"

Some years ago I was having lunch with a pastor friend of mine and, you know, when pastors get together, we just share with each other. We share the good, the bad, the ugly, all of it. And in the course of our conversation, he began to share with me that there was a family in his church that they weren't really causing trouble, they were just, it was one of those relationships that he was strained with them and they were strained with him, and we began to kind of peel the onion and just see what was happening, and it so happened to be that this family held a very specific opinion or very specific way of looking at some Scriptures and it just so happened that my friend, the pastor, saw it differently. Now,

we're not dealing with matters of eternal importance but a matter of opinion, a perspective as this Scripture says, a doctrinal piece. And one of the issues that he had and this is what he voiced to me, he said, "Jeff, here's my struggle." He said, "I spent over ten years in graduate school," he said, "I've gone to school, I've gotten the degrees. These folks, they didn't even go to college and," he said, "if somebody like you told me that you believed this, I might pay attention to them but I'm not going to listen to these folks." You should have seen his face when I said, "Friend, I side with them, not you." He said, "What?" And we began to have a Bible study right there at the table and I showed him where I thought that the way they were seeing some things was actually proper and biblical doctrine. Interesting how guilty we can become to making sure that there are credentials that are present rather than the authority of, "Thus saith the Lord."

But we have to ask ourselves, "So what's the agenda here? Why would these folks do this to Jesus? Why would they ask this of Jesus? Why would they make such a big deal of he didn't go the right school and he doesn't have the right pieces of paper?" Well, ultimately the agenda is they want to propagate the system that's already – listen – working for them. It's an agenda is what it is. They need to keep the machine rolling. They need to keep things as they are because Jesus was messing everything up. Remember the Sermon on the Mount? It has been said, but I say to you. And everywhere Jesus went, the crowds were consumed and everywhere Jesus went – listen to this – they left where they were teaching and went to where Jesus was teaching. So we says, "What is the agenda behind these folks?" They were criticizing Jesus having – listen – never even sat under his feet.

The next few stories that I'm going to share with you come very specifically from my background and they're going to kind of be academic in nature, so put up with me. I promise it's going to get real practical as we head on through the message. But I remember when I was in graduate school, I had a professor who spoke one day, and by the way, this man had multiple degrees and he was experienced not just academically but he had, I mean, this guy had been around for a while and he spoke out very specifically against a specific teaching, a specific author and a specific book and he just went on and on and on about how we should have no business, there is no relevance to this, it's just not reasonable to see things from this perspective. It just so happened because I've got a lot of different books on my shelf, I've got a lot of books. By the way, just so you know, I have a heresy shelf on my shelf. In other words, you come and see my books, I don't believe everything that's on there. Sometimes you've got to read what the other people believe to have an understanding, okay?

All that being said, I happened to have this very specific book by this specific author on my shelf so I decided to bring it to class the next time because I just want to learn. I'm just a seeker of truth. I want to know because I had read the book and I didn't see what he was seeing and I just wanted to make sure that I had all my ducks in a row. I'll never forget, here was this man when I brought it to class, I brought this book in and I showed it to the class and I showed it to him, here's what he said, he goes, "Ah, that's what that book looks like. I've never seen it before." How can you spend an entire 30 minutes lecturing against something you've never looked at? You've never read? You've never been exposed to?

So when these men come to Jesus, listen to their agenda. When they're saying, "How does this guy get away with what he's teaching, he's never been to our school," let me ask you a question: had they ever sat in the class of Jesus? No. You see, their agenda was to keep what they were doing perpetually going whereas hoping to silence him. So what was his answer? Notice what he says, he comes to them and he says, "Guys, you claim that I need to obey the law, you claim that I need to do what you're telling me to do, but you can't even do it yourself." Let me tell you what Jesus has called them out as: he's called them out as a hypocrite. Just like in Matthew 23 when he says, "Do what these guys say but don't do what they do because their lives are not matching their lips."

Again, let me take you back to my academic background. This is one of those stories, in fact, it's one of my wife's favorite stories from my graduate days. I had a professor who was teaching what we call biblical hermeneutics. You say, "Biblical what?" Biblical hermeneutics is basically how do you study the Bible, how do you approach theology, how do you study these things. And as we were going through, one of the things that he was trying to share with us is that anytime you're teaching, you're preaching, you're communicating, you're in a small group, whatever it is, you have a limited amount of time and in that limited amount of time, you don't want to waste time, you want to maximize your time. In his illustration that he used that day in class, he said in 1 Corinthians 9, he then called out a specific translation of Scripture, he said in that translation of Scripture it uses the word "pummel." Paul talks about that, he pummels his body. And he says now if you were to read that in a setting such as this, you would have people stare at you like, "What does that mean?" and you'd have to explain what it means and you would – listen – waste valuable teaching and preaching time when all you have to do is go grab a different translation of Scripture, an easier word is used and you can move on to more important matters.

He went on teaching and I began to scratch my head and I thought, "Do you know what? He just called out what I have in my backpack and I've never seen the word 'pummel' in my life, much less in the Bible." So I decided to pull my Bible out, open to the passage that he referred to, and the word "pummel" was nowhere to be found. That's interesting. Maybe I just misheard. Maybe I misunderstood. So I nudged my neighbor, a guy sitting next to me who happened to be my roommate and I said, "Hey, can I borrow your Bible for a moment?" because I knew he used a different translation than I did and I opened up his Bible, same passage, the word "pummel" was nowhere to be found. So I'm now at this point very confused. We've just had a lesson about biblical hermeneutics about not using a passage that uses a word that I can't find.

So I raised my hand. Big mistake. Big mistake. I raised my hand, I said, "Excuse me, sir." I said, "Can I go back about 5 or 6 minutes? You made this reference and I appreciate that you made it but," I said, "I just, I want to understand. I don't see the word here, I don't see the word here." To which he opened up his own Bible and when he read the passage, can you guess what word was in there? Pummel. He spent 20 minutes telling us why it would now be better to use the word "pummel" because we can give a better picture to our listeners of what the word really means. Do you see the hypocrisy? The

hypocrisy is don't do it because you'll waste time, oh, but if it's in mine, you need to do it because it is best.

You see, that's exactly what Jesus was calling out. He said, "Guys, you want credentials from me? You want a resume from me? You want to see all the t's crossed and the i's dotted? Here's the very problem: you don't even cross the t's you wanted me to cross as well." So what Jesus answers with what he calls out with, he says, "Even your own credentials, listen, are hypocritical in their very nature."

But then the question gets a little more personal. They come to him and they ask him this question in verse 20, the people answer and they said, "You have a devil. Who goes about to kill you?" Now, at this point, they're getting serious. They're saying, "Okay, it's one thing to talk about graduate degrees, it's one thing to talk about the rabbi you studied under, now we're going to say that the power by which you do things is of no less than from the pit of hell itself."

Now, this is an interesting assumption. They were assuming that because Jesus taught differently, acted differently, spoke differently and was different, then obviously because they were of God, Jesus had to be in error, he had to be "on the other side." Now, what's interesting to me is these are the same people who in Mark 3 and in Matthew 12 accuse Jesus of the same thing. Here was Jesus healing someone on the Sabbath day just like in this story, they came to him and accused him and said, "The only way you can do this is by the power of Beelzebub." In other words, if you don't do it our way and if you don't do it the way that we certify, then you have to be of the enemy. And notice what Jesus says in those other passages. He says, "How can Satan kick out Satan? For a house that is divided cannot stand." These same people who had "been schooled" by Jesus on the same issue, come back to him again and say, "Well, you've got to have a devil." They assumed that because he was not from their school with their opinion and their perspective, surely he could not be of God.

You say, "What is the agenda here? What are they trying to do?" You see, when Jesus fed the multitudes, he emptied out their classroom. When Jesus went into a community and he began to heal people, they walked out of the synagogues and they came into the streets. In fact, I think the best illustration of their agenda is found in Mark 5. Jesus finds himself in an area known as Decapolis, the area of ten cities. It's a metropolitan area and right there is a man who is not clothed, he is torn from head to toe, he has been put shackles upon and he has busted them out. He is a man known as the demoniac. Here was a guy that nobody could control. Here was a guy who had run away from culture, messed up culture, done everything to destroy it. Here was a man that the community – listen – they ostracized him and said, "We don't want to have anything to do with this guy." Listen, he is a hopeless cause.

Jesus goes to him, entertains a conversation and says, "What is your name?" And the demons speak, the unclean spirit speaks and says, "We are Legion, for we are many." You remember the story, Jesus cast the demons out, they go into the swine or the pig, they go down into the water and they drown. At that point, word gets out to these cities.

People begin to come to where Jesus and this man are and the Bible makes it very clear that this man who was running around without a stitch of clothing on, is now completely clothed. This man who was erratic and nobody could discipline or control, is now seated in his right mind.

I want you to think about that for just a moment. A man who had terrorized their community was now no longer a terror. A man who they wanted to keep their children from, was now someone who they could be in the presence therein. And when they came and found Jesus and the man, do you know what they griped about? They said, "Do you realize how much money you cost us when those pigs went into the water?"

Maybe we need a contemporary example. Many of you have heard of a faith system known as Scientology. The religion of Hollywood. Originated by a man known as L. Ron Hubbard. Do you know what L. Ron Hubbard said? He said, "The greatest way to make money in America is to invent your own religion." And he did.

You see, when we begin to create these religious systems, what happens is it becomes about the power, it becomes about the authority, and it becomes about the money. These are the same individuals, remember what Jesus did and is about to do again? He comes in at Passover, he overturns the table. Why? Because they were making a profit off the spiritual sacrifices of the people of God. What Jesus is revealing to them, what they are revealing to us, is that their agenda was that all they desired was authority, power and money.

So what does Jesus say? He says, "Okay, if this is how you're going to play the game, let's talk about circumcision. You're upset with me because I healed a man on the Sabbath day. You're not supposed to do that, supposedly. But if a young child is on the eighth day and it happens to be the Sabbath day, you will circumcise him." And Jesus goes on to say, he says, "That I have made a man whole on the Sabbath day. Judge not according to the appearance but judge righteous judgment." What Jesus is answering these critics, he's saying to them, he's communicating that there is no way that by your credentials, there is no way by your standards that any man could ever be considered faultless and sinless before God, much less each other. What Jesus is saying, his answer to them not only was that you're a hypocrite to the first question, but to the second question is, you're not even who you think you are.

You know, this year we celebrate the 500th anniversary of an event in the life of a man by the name of Martin Luther. Martin Luther was a small town monk in Germany who in October of 1517 goes to the church door in Wittenburg, Germany and he tacks up what are famously known as the 95 theses, his issues, his struggles, his problems, that he had at that day with the teaching of the church as a whole. But when you look at the backstory, when you look at what happened prior to that event, you see a man who was so dedicated to the things of God, in fact, he was known to pray and to fast for not just days but sometimes weeks at a time. He would crawl on his hands and his knees, in fact, at one point he was known to confess his sins for in excess of over 24 hours. Can you imagine confessing your sins for 24 hours, praying for days at a time? But Martin Luther realized

something very important about 500 years ago, something you and I need to know, and something these individuals need to learn: that there is no amount of our effort, our energy, our endeavor, our money or our time that can ever satisfy our sin problem.

You see, Luther thought if I just do enough, God will be happy with me. If I just give enough or – listen, in his case – if I give enough up, God will be pleased with me. But thankfully about 500 years ago, he read Romans 1:16 and says, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," and he quotes over there in Habakkuk 2 that says, "The just shall live by faith." And he understood that it was by faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, not in his own personal endeavors.

So when these men come to Jesus and they say, "You're not even on the right team," he says, "You know, when you look at what you're doing, there is no way that your deeds will ever add up to even be satisfactory by the law that you claim to obey."

So, first, they challenge his pedigree, then they challenge his power, and finally they come to him and they say, "Okay, we're going to challenge the process." And they come to Jesus and they say, "Alright, you claim to be the Messiah. We know you didn't go to the right school and we know you claim to be on God's side, but here's the final thing: if you really were the Messiah, then you would show up," this is in verse 25 and 26, "you would show up in such a way that we wouldn't know you in advance, you would just miraculously come out of the sky and to an amazing work." Now, here is the assumption they were making: they were assuming that what we see in the Old Testament, particularly the passage about the "second coming of Jesus" were the passages regarding the only coming of Jesus. They assumed that the Messiah would show up miraculously out of the clouds, the Messiah would show up and he would not be one who mixed and mingled around them, the Messiah would come and they would not say, "Oh, he's from Galilee." You see, their assumption was only based on the prophetic, what we call second coming passages and not the other half of the story.

So what was their agenda? What were they really trying and desiring to accomplish? By only focusing on those end time passages, what they really wanted and what they truly desired were for the Romans to be put out of business and for them to be put into business. What they really desired is for Pilate and for Herod and these other characters to no longer possess the seats they possessed, but that they, the Sanhedrin and these men, they would now sit on the proverbial throne.

Some years ago, I had a conversation with a friend of mine. By the way, allow me to share with you, he is still a friend of mine. But sometimes even friends have conversations that are a tad bit heated. This friend of mine is a very active individual in the political process and, by the way, I believe that as believers in Jesus Christ, we should be active in all processes of our life wherever we find ourselves. But this individual was very active in the political process and he was constantly criticizing me because I was not as active as he was. He thought I should be more vocal, I should be more present, and that that realm of life, I should be "as active as he was."

One day, you know, sometimes you're in a conversation and you can say this to friends, you know, sometimes you're in a conversation with somebody and you've had enough of it, and I looked at him one day and I can't believe it came out of my mouth but it did. I said, "Friend, let me ask you a question. Do you really want revival or do you just want to be in charge?" And he looked at me like you're looking at me. I want you to think about that for a moment. Do you and I really want revival or do we just want to make the rules?

You know, that's what was happening here in John 7. These guys criticized Jesus because he didn't go to school with them. They criticized Jesus because he did things differently than them. But finally they said, "Alright, here's the deal: you're not taking the throne. You're not taking the sword. You're not taking the scepter. So there's no way you can be the Messiah." Notice Jesus' answer, the very end of verses 27 through 29, notice what he says, it says, "He cried out in the temple." In other words, he got vocal, he got loud. He said, "Guys, you know where I'm from."

You say, "Why is that important?" Because the prophecies about Jesus coming one day out of the clouds are just as valid as the prophecy that he would be born in Bethlehem, and just as important as the prophecy that he would come out of Egypt, and just as important as that he would be called from Nazareth, just as important. So what Jesus is answering them and what he's showing all of us is, yes, there is going to be a time where Jesus splits the sky wide open. Yes, there is going to be a time where he comes and sits on a throne. Yes, there's going to be a time where his enemies and those who rebel against him will be not only eradicated and eliminated but they will be held in judgment of the rebellion. Yes, that is true but listen, before you put a crown on, you've got to go through the cross. And before you have Jesus seated on a throne, you have to have Jesus hanging on a cross. And before you have Jesus coming out of the clouds, you have to have Jesus – listen – coming out of the grave. And what Jesus is communicating to them when he says, "But you know where I've come from, you know who I am," he is communicating, "Yes, what you desire will one day happen, however, in order to attain the throne, in order to attain," and by the way, Revelation 1:5 says that you and I one day will be kings and priests with the Lord, one day as believers in Jesus, we will reign with him, but before we reign with him, we have to be a child of his. In John 1:12 he says, "And those who believe on me shall have the right to be called the sons of God."

You see, when you look at all these issues of credentials, what it all boils down to is they put up all these systems in place – listen – because they didn't want to deal with their sin problem and realized that they would never be good enough, didn't matter what school they went to, didn't matter who thought what about them, but they needed a Savior and that their Savior was standing right before them.

Let me end with this question: irrespective of what your personal credentials are for Jesus, please understand that he is absolutely qualified to be your Savior, the question is, is he?

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Maybe you're that person today, maybe you came to this place in life with a series of questions, maybe even doubts or

frustrations, and maybe today you realize for the first time the importance of Jesus in your life, maybe you set out all the criteria and you put out all the credentials and maybe today from the word of God you finally realized that it doesn't matter what you want it to be or you expect it to be you, it's who Jesus already is. Maybe you're at that place in life where it's time to believe, it's time to trust, it's time to exercise faith. If you're that person today, I have great news for you. You don't have to jump through a series of hoops, you don't have to take a bunch of religious classes, in fact, all you need to do is have a very serious sincere conversation with God. You don't have to have this conversation out loud, in fact, you don't even have to say the same words that I would say, but maybe your conversation would sound a little something like this. "God, today I just want to confess I've tried a lot of different ways but I've yet to try it your way. Lord, I've come to understand today that Jesus loves me so much that he came on my behalf. Lord, I understand, I believe today that Jesus loved me so much that he lived a sinless life on my behalf. I understand today that Jesus loved me so much he was willing to go to the cross and he rose from the dead so I could be forgiven of my sins. God, today I don't have all the answers to all the world's problems but I do know that Jesus is the answer to my sin problem. In the best way I know how, Lord, I'm admitting I'm the problem and that Jesus is the answer. I'm asking you to forgive me. I'm asking you to save me. In the best way I know how, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today. We'd love to have a conversation with you. We'd love to just hear what the Lord is doing and how he's working in your life. Or maybe that conversation has already taken place and maybe as you continue to walk with and take this journey with Jesus, you've stumbled along a path where Jesus has become more about your credentials than his qualifications. Whatever it may be, if the Lord is working and moving in your life, we just want to celebrate with you.

Lord, as we come to this time, how grateful we are that you're a God of second chances. Lord, we confess that we've spent days, weeks, and some of us months and years, trying to do it our own way when we recognize today that you have the best way. So God, I pray today whatever it is that we need to do, whatever decision we need to make, that we would not look at that decision through our own lenses but through the lens of your word. Help us, O God, to be where you want us to be, doing what you've called us to do in the name of Jesus Christ. It's in his name we pray. Amen.