

4. Whose Verdict?

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[0 : 00] Gracious God, we've just sung of the greatness of your character, the power of your deeds, the certainty of your promises and the truthfulness of your word.

And we pray that as we look together at your word this afternoon, you would convince us more firmly of all of these things.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. I'd be very glad if you would turn to John's Gospel and to Chapter 5.

Excuse me, you'll find that on page 890 in the Church Bibles. We've been in John Chapter 5. This is our fourth one and final one in this short chapter.

Let me just set the scene before we read. Indeed, Jesus has done a great and dramatic miracle in healing a paralyzed man, and out of that has arisen a very sharp controversy.

[1 : 09] And we're going to read the last part of the chapter from verse 30. Jesus speaking. I can do nothing on my own.

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. If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not deemed true.

There is another who bears witness about me. And I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. You sent to John. And he's 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.

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'm doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me.

[2 : 15] And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you've never heard. His form you've never seen. And you do not have his word abiding in you.

For you do not believe the one who he has sent. You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life. And it is they that bear witness about me.

Yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. I do not receive glory from people. But I know that you do not have the love of God within you.

I've come in my Father's name and you don't receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will seek him. How can you believe when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?

Do not think that I'll accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you, Moses, on whom you've set your hope. If you believed Moses, you'd believe me.

[3 : 19] For he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words? Ewan McGregor, the famous actor, describes how as part of a long motorbike trip from John O'Groats to South Africa, he passed through the town of Matmata in rural Tunisia.

Not a name to ring bells in most minds, but quite an important name for him. Because it was in Matmata that a number of scenes from Star Wars were shot.

And McGregor, who plays the younger Obi-Wan Kenobi in the Star Wars films, if you're familiar with those, said this of his visit to that place. We went to the place where Luke Skywalker, his character, grew up in the film.

Luke Skywalker, not his character, grew up in the films. I was standing next to my own poster there. The place was full of Star Wars fans.

And no one recognized me. Now, let me say, I imagine that being recognized in public is one of the downsides of being an actor of his fame. And it might be nice from time to time not to be recognized all the same.

[4 : 45] You can see how in that place, it might just be a bit disappointing not to be recognized. Long journey through the desert.

Your own poster up everywhere. The place full of fanatical Trekkies who ought to know an Obi-Wan when they see one. And nobody does.

No welcoming party. No, whoa, I didn't expect to see you here. Nothing. Of course, all sorts of possible reasons for that. It's possible that he no longer looked quite as cool as Kenobi after a long, dusty desert bike ride.

Perhaps more likely that nobody expects to see Obi-Wan Kenobi anywhere other than on the screen. All the same.

You'd think someone would notice, wouldn't you? At the beginning of John's Gospel, something very like that is said of Jesus.

[5 : 45] He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, and his own did not receive him.

He came into the world and a nation where he should have been recognized, says John, and he wasn't. Now that's odd, isn't it? We're not talking here about a movie star after a dusty bike ride, but the creator of the world speaking and acting so much like the creator of the world.

Why not recognized? Why was he not received? It's odd, isn't it? We see something very similar at the beginning of John chapter 5.

A real live example of this non-reception of the creator of the world. An invalid man is dramatically healed. In no time at all, the religious authorities are plotting to kill the healer.

Not only that, this man's life is transformed by his brief encounter with Jesus. And yet, less than a day after that marvelous change in life, he is betraying his healer to the authorities.

[7 : 12] It's odd, isn't it? And this isn't the only place in this gospel where that kind of unexpected hostility bubbles to the surface.

In the end, of course, it leads to his death. You have to ask the question, don't you? What is it about human beings that makes it possible for us to witness at first hand, up close, such steady, generous, kind, restoring, life-giving power at work and want to murder it?

Why does such a religiously minded group of people as these want to murder the maker and life-giver? Well, in this little section at the end of the chapter, Jesus turns his words towards them, the hearers.

Look again at verse 41. I do not receive glory from people, but I know that you do not have the love of God within you.

I've come in my Father's name and you don't receive me. If another comes in his own name, you'll receive him. How can you believe when you receive glory from one another and don't seek the glory that comes from the only God?

[8 : 40] Do not think that I'll accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you, Moses, on whom you've set your hope. If you believe Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you don't believe his writings, how will you believe my words?

Why is Jesus not received? Well, let me give you three reasons from this chapter. First, these people used religion to keep God at a distance, not to welcome him.

Surprisingly, this is not a place where people loved God. Verse 41 again. I don't receive glory from people, but I know that you don't have the love of God within you.

I didn't come here to attract your praise. My interests lie in another direction. To do the work that I've been sent to do, says Jesus. But I do know about you.

And I know that despite your apparent concern for God's reputation, you do not have love for God within you. You're faking it, in other words.

[9 : 47] Now, that's a very strong statement. Is it fair? Might it not be that these people just didn't expect him to show up?

A bit like Obi-Wan turning up at Matta. Rather a surprise to see him there. Well, according to Jesus, it is absolutely not like that.

These are people who knew the teaching of Moses. And they knew that the teaching of Moses was from God. And they knew that that teaching pointed forward to a coming rescuer.

Look at verse 46. If you believed Moses, you'd believe me. For he wrote about me. It wasn't that they heard Jesus' words and said to themselves, what on earth is he talking about?

There's nobody coming from God. Quite the opposite. In fact, says Jesus, you guys are well practiced in looking out for a promised rescuer.

[10:45] Look at verse 43. I've come in my father's name and you don't receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. The truth is, there are plenty of people in Jesus' day claiming to be God's chosen rescuers.

We have historical information about some of them. If you go to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem today, you will find an extensive display about a man called Simon Bar Kochba.

He lived towards the end of the first century. He led a revolt in AD 132. Many people thought that he was the real deal.

He's described by a great rabbi of his day as the star out of Jacob. That is a figure promised in the teaching of Moses.

And he was well received. He set up an independent state of Israel, which he ruled in defiance of the Romans for three years until he was overthrown. If someone else comes in his own name, says Jesus, you will receive him.

[11:57] These people didn't have a problem believing that a rescuer was coming. What they wouldn't do was receive the real one when he came.

First century Judaism appears to have been built to keep God at arm's length. They had the scriptures. They knew that a rescuer was coming.

Posters all over the place. And his visit, not a surprise. But when he came, well, they listened to nearly anyone else.

Can I say that nothing much has changed? It's often said that people make up religion to inject a sense of meaning into a meaningless world.

We need to feel that something is there. And so despite evidence to the contrary, we invent God in order to make ourselves feel better.

[12:58] The Bible's diagnosis is quite the opposite from that. That really we all know deep down that God is there. But we use religion as a kind of tool to keep him just far enough away.

The tool is wielded, of course, in a number of different ways by religious and non-religious people. Let me give you a number of different versions on the use of the religion tool.

There's the religious person's method. We're very open to God in our tradition. But this Jesus version of God, well, he's much too definite for us.

Or there's the positive non-religious person's version. There probably is a God. But there are so many religions, they can't all be right.

How could we ever really know for sure which is the correct version? Or there's the more negative non-religious person's use of the tool.

[14:02] Religions, there are so many, they can't all be right. It's all just whistling in the wind to keep your spirits up. But so often religion is used to avoid taking a close look at the real Jesus.

Now let me say, in the face of all of those, can I observe how difficult it is to know what you'd have to do to be more convincingly like God than Jesus is in this chapter?

What could you do to be more like God than Jesus looks in this chapter? Could you behave more like God than Jesus behaves in this chapter? Greater dignity?

Greater loving concern? Greater power? Could you? Could you speak more like God than Jesus does in this chapter? Greater bravery?

Greater clarity? Greater incisiveness? I doubt it. Jesus speaks and acts ever so like God. And they look at him and say, can't possibly be from God.

[15:11] We must get rid of him. That human desire to keep God at arm's length is shot through this drama.

And actually, it's shot through normal human experience as well. Let me talk about my own experience for a moment. I remember two months or so before I went to university, a Christian person knocked on our front door.

I don't know what brand of Christian they were, but it was somebody who wanted to talk about Jesus. And I remember getting rid of that person just as quickly as I possibly could.

And saying to myself, as I closed the front door, when I go to university, I'm going to avoid people like that. Because I do not want God to interfere in my life.

Despite knowing very little about Jesus, I remember saying that to myself. I was very sure that I did not want God to interfere with my life.

[16:17] Christianity is a great hiding place for the person who wants to avoid Jesus. And of course, being religious in general is just the same.

As a religious person, you can so easily pull the wool over everybody else's eyes. Fool everyone into thinking that you're interested in God, when actually you'd rather just keep him at a comfortable distance.

You can even fool yourself about that. What is quite clear from this passage is that Jesus is not fooled by any of that. I do not accept praise from men, but I know you.

Why is the thought of facing the true God so uncomfortable? Why? Well, there may be a number of reasons for that.

Some people fear God because of past experience of religious things or people. Because religion is so often set up to keep God out, it can be profoundly manipulative.

[17:22] And that's not always good for people. Sometimes people fear facing God because of the present world climate. We worry about the sort of influence that religious things can have on people for obvious ill.

Words like fundamentalism and radicalization float quickly into our minds. Sometimes we fear the loss of our own autonomy.

It is scary, is it not, to trust yourself to another. To trust that another is lovingly in control of your life. This passage gives us another reason.

These people used religion to praise one another. Not to seek God's praise. Jesus' complaint here is that the religious life of these people was designed not to gain God's approval, but rather to gain approval from one another.

Look at verse 44, would you please? How can you believe when you receive glory from one another and don't seek the glory that comes from the only God?

[18:30] Despite looking ever so God-ish, this whole system is designed to gain approval of people.

Now, religion is often like that. To be full of the scriptures, full of words, full of prayers, all sorts of God-ish looking things, but basically have its eyes on people and what people think of you.

I have a friend who talked a little while ago to a senior national church figure who said, You know, I sometimes worry that I've spent all my time and energy thinking about church and not nearly enough thinking about Jesus.

So often that's true of religious things. Eyes on church, eyes on people, but not really on Jesus. Of course, there's nothing unusual about this in human experience.

I used to work in medicine. And there were many motivations in hospital medicine, but without doubt, one of the biggest drivers in hospital medicine was the desire to be recognized as someone by a small group of experts.

[19:50] And I guess that's true in many professional situations. Often the patients didn't understand a word that their doctors were saying, and they didn't really mind.

Certainly the word outside hospital knew nothing about what was going on inside, but many medical careers are sustained day by day by the knowledge that a small group of people recognize me as something.

Much of human experience is just like that. In one way or other, driven by the desire to be recognized by people rather than recognized by God.

To please and be pleased by other people rather than God. Of course, it goes in all sorts of directions, doesn't it? Might be your boyfriend, your girlfriend, your spouse, your partner, your parents, your children.

And so often the desire for approval by people is a fundamental issue in whether people are willing to look seriously at Jesus.

[21:03] I can't listen to him. What will my friends think if I change my perspective or change my mind? I have a good friend, a couple of good friends.

We talked at some length about Christianity many years ago. After a while, a couple of days later, she came up to me and said, you know, I would really, really like to find out more about this.

But Chris, that was her husband, he just isn't very keen. I want to know whether it's true, but it costs too much to look.

That's the way it was back then with these people and so often is now. And I suppose the big question is, whose approval matters ultimately?

Whose is worth having, more worth having? Friends, neighbours, family members, work colleagues, or the life giver and judge, Jesus himself?

[22 : 13] Why is Jesus not received? Well, because these people used religion to keep God at arm's length and used religion to gain praise from one another.

But there's a third thing in this passage. In many ways, the most surprising of all, and probably at the root of them all. It's not something the religious people do.

It's something the man by the pool does. The man who's healed. And it's this. Jesus knows the truth about him. Think of this paralysed man.

We're told that he's been an invalid for 38 years. 30 years. Instantly, after a brief conversation with Jesus, he's made whole. The whole thing is done so quietly and undramatically, he doesn't even know who it is that's made him well.

Later, they meet up in the temple and have a brief conversation. In verse 12, he's questioned by the religious authorities who made him well. Let me read from verse 13.

[23 : 18] The man who'd been healed didn't know who it was. Jesus had withdrawn as there was a crowd in the place. Afterward, Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, See, you're well. Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.

The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who'd healed him. How is that not an extraordinary thing to do? After a brief conversation, he is off to betray his healer to the authorities. It's an extraordinary thing to do. You'd hardly think it possible. And the only possible explanation, I think, is Jesus' directness.

See you well. Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you. Now, we've no particular indication that this man was more sinful and in need of forgiveness than any other ordinary person. But apparently, he is more upset about Jesus' words in the temple than he is glad about his deliverance from his disability. Is that not extraordinary?

[24 : 30] Why does religion so often keep God at arm's length? Why do human beings spend so much time seeking the approval of other human beings rather than their maker?

Well, because God knows us as we really are. He can't be fooled. The wool cannot be pulled over his eyes.

Why is Jesus not received in this chapter by this healed man? Because he knows him. He knows what he's like.

Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you. And often the thought that there is one who knows us absolutely as we are.

The thought that we might need forgiveness for the way we are. The thought that we might need to surrender control of our lives to one who has rights over us.

[25 : 35] Make the possibility of looking at Jesus seriously a risk that people are just not willing to take. Because of that, in this chapter, this marvelous person is refused by the one who was healed by him.

Extraordinary, isn't it? You'd hardly credit it. And yet that's precisely what happened. Now our time is gone. Briefly, as we close, let's consider the person who is so often held at a distance and refused access.

Is he unkind? Far from it. Is he miserly? Well, no, he's generous and loving.

Is he manipulative? Bad for people? Well, no. He speaks the truth rather than what people want to hear, which manipulative people always do.

Is he a bragger, a show-off? No, the miracle is done amazingly quietly and self-effacingly. Is he self-absorbed? No. No. He's deeply concerned for the health and life of all he comes across.

[27 : 05] Indeed, as the story goes on, all of those other-centered, self-effacing, generous, kind, powerful attributes head him towards death on a cross for the salvation of sinful people.

What is there not to like about him? And how perverse is it that we love to hold him at arm's length? Let's pray together. Let's pray together.

Pray for ourselves that despite the fact that he knows the truth about us, that he speaks the truth, that he's not fooled, we ourselves would be drawn by his kindness, generosity, unself-centeredness, and love to put our trust in him, and to point others towards trust in him.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.