

Is This Man the Christ? John 7:1-31
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We come together this morning as the family of God gathered around the Word of God to listen to and be changed by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. What a privilege this is for us. What a gift it is to have this revelation from God. What hope we have in Jesus: who He is and what He has done for us. We have a rock to stand on in this world that sometimes seems to be crumbling around us. We have a foundation. We have an anchor. Do you believe that this morning?

I don't know for each and every one of you, how your past couple weeks have been. But I do know from many of you, I've spoken with you, and I've prayed for specific things going on in your lives. And I know there are joys and there are struggles. And I just want to rejoice together this morning in the fact that we have a rock to stand on. We have such an amazing Savior, who has all authority, who has all power, and who is infinitely kind and compassionate toward us. My prayer is that we will rest in Him and hide in Him today.

We come again and again to this Book because it is God's Word to us, God's revelation of Himself to us. And it's in this Book that we can find real hope. Where else would we turn? What else could we do when the storms of life sweep over us, when life seems so uncertain, unpredictable, unstable? This is our sure hope.

I hope you find the Word of God an encouragement to your soul. I hope you don't find it boring or trivial or irrelevant. Just think of what we hold here in our hands. The very Word of God to us! What could be more exciting and weighty and relevant to our lives than this?

And yet our sinful hearts grow cold. We're so prone to wander. We're distracted by other things, discouraged by trials, overwhelmed by responsibilities. Let's confess that to the Lord, and let's ask Him to grant us a passion for Him and His Word. We need His Word so desperately. So when you feel that apathy creeping into your heart, fall down on your knees and plead for mercy. Ask God to change your desires. Ask Him to kill your fleshly desires and intensify your godly desires.

One of the pieces of our mission statement here at Three Rivers Grace is to proclaim the truth of God's Word. And this is one of the key components of our times of corporate worship. Each Lord's Day as we gather together we want to proclaim the truth of God's Word and receive the truth of God's Word into our hearts. We are Word-centered, Word-focused, because it's in the

revealed Word of God that we find the Good News of Jesus Christ our Savior from sin. This Book is all about Christ, and therefore we want to be all about this Book. We want to be a people of the Book. We want to come hungering and thirsting for the truth of God's Word. I hope you've come this morning eager to feed on God's Word. I hope you've been feeding on God's Word all week long in your own personal times in the Word and in prayer, and I hope that as we come together as a body this morning that we will all be edified by our corporate time in the Word.

For this to happen as it ought to, and as we desire it to happen, it does require something of all of us. For the one preaching it requires much study and preparation and prayer and thought in order to preach well. And for all of us it requires focus and discipline to listen well. It's my prayer that I will do my part in proclaiming the truth of God's Word and that we will all do our part in listening attentively and openly and eagerly to receive what God has for us. Let's come to this time eager to experience the power of the Word.

In coming to the next chapter in our study through the Gospel of John, there are many threads to the complex drama of Jesus' earthly ministry. There are many themes woven together through these interactions. Many of them we've already touched on at previous points in our study of John and will surely see again as we continue.

And I struggled some this week to choose what to focus on here. At the Bible study Tuesday morning we struggled together with what all we should be taking away from this passage. It's always helpful in the Gospel of John to remind ourselves of the purpose statement of this book. I've cited it many times. John 20:30-31, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." So as we look at some of the threads running through these verses, and it may seem like we're jumping around a bit, or like the passage is jumping around a bit from point to point, let's keep in mind that it's all here for the purpose of pointing us to faith in Jesus, pointing us to a belief in Him as the Son of God, that we would trust in Him and inherit eternal life.

So as we look at some of the things going on in this section, I want us to be asking the same question people are discussing and debating here. The question concerning Jesus' identity. The question of whether He is the Messiah. Put yourself inside these events, these interactions. Who do you say that He is?

Liar, Lunatic, or Lord?

Who is Jesus? Again and again in this Gospel we are confronted with this question, and I pray that our lives will be changed as we see His power and authority. Even as many oppose Him, and even His own family do not believe in Him, His true identity just becomes clearer and clearer. It is obvious that He is not insane or possessed by a demon. It is obvious that He is not merely a good man. He has been sent from the Father. He is the Messiah.

Thinking about this passage reminds me of C. S. Lewis's well-known quote about Jesus being either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. In his book *Mere Christianity* he writes this: "I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."¹ Lewis warns us against claiming that Jesus was merely a great moral teacher. And our passage this morning warns us strongly against concluding that Jesus was either a lunatic or demonic. There is only one option left. He is Lord. He is sent from the Father. He is the Messiah. He is who He claims to be.

The Feast of Booths

As we move from chapter 6 to chapter 7 we're jumping forward in time about 6 months. The feeding of the 5,000 and the bread of life discourse were at the time of Passover, which is in the springtime, March or April. John 6:4 tells us, "Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand." Although Jesus did not go down to Jerusalem for the Passover that year. He remained in the north, in Galilee.

Now in chapter 7 it's the Feast of Booths, also known as the Feast of Tabernacles, that is happening. This feast happens in the Fall, about 6 months after the Passover, and about 6 months before the next Passover. So to locate ourselves in the timeline of Jesus' earthly ministry, we're at the halfway point of the final year.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996; orig. published 1943), page 56.

That may seem odd, since we're only in chapter 7, and there are 21 chapters in this Gospel. But if it seems odd that we're already this close to the end chronologically, it just highlights the Gospel-writers' emphasis on the final months, the final days, of Jesus' ministry leading up to His death and resurrection. The closer we get to the end, the more detail we get.

Right now we're 6 months out. We're 6 months away from Jesus entering Jerusalem at the time of Passover for the purpose of laying His life down as the Passover Lamb.

This is a different feast that is going on in chapter 7. Not the Passover, but the Feast of Tabernacles. We heard it described in the Old Testament reading from Leviticus. This feast was a reminder of God's faithfulness during the wilderness wanderings. God took care of His people while they were travelling those 40 years. They had been delivered from Egypt but had not yet been given the Promised Land. God wanted them to remember that time, and so He appointed this 7-day feast. They would rest during this time. They would also live in tents, tabernacles, booths. I guess it was a bit like a camping trip for the Israelites to remember that significant piece of their history.

Surprising Unbelief

Well, Jesus' brothers see this event as an opportunity for Jesus to make a big appearance in Jerusalem. This Feast is a big deal. People will be flocking to Jerusalem. What a great occasion for Jesus to display His power to the world! Jesus' brothers are acting like His marketing consultants, His agents. They want to take Him on tour, and what bigger venue than Jerusalem! That's the biggest stage there is!

Do you see the pressure they put on Jesus? Read vv. 2-4. It seems to make sense, right? But then look at verse 5. This is shocking. We might expect verse 5 to say just the opposite of what it actually says. We might expect the brothers' statements in verses 3-4 to be evidence that they DO believe in Jesus.

What we're seeing is that Jesus' own brothers are so much like the crowds who are enamored with Jesus in only a superficial way. They've seen His miracles. They've seen the crowds drawn to Him like a magnet. And this would be particularly exciting for Jesus' brothers. They're probably thinking, What can I get out of this? Let's take this show on the road, and I'll get to be part of the inner circle, I'll get to benefit from my brothers' fame. Let's milk this for all it's worth!

What John, the Gospel-writer, makes clear for us in this shocking statement in verse 5 is that their attitude is not evidence of belief. On the contrary, it's evidence of *unbelief*.

What a stunning and convicting word this is to us. It raises the question again for us, Why are you interested in Jesus? What attracts you to Him? Is it merely because you think He can get you some of the stuff you want? Are you wanting to ride this wave in the hopes of getting the money or fame or comfort that you've always craved?

There's a folk singer named Slaid Cleaves. I stumbled upon his music. I heard an interview with him on the radio at some point, and then looked up a couple of his songs. And there's a line in one of his songs that sticks in my mind, and in a disturbing way. It's a cynical kind of song, observing various things that aren't right in the world. At one point he sings, "the profiteers count their cash and praise Jesus."

Oh, let's not think of Jesus that way. Let's not see Him as our ticket to health and wealth and prosperity. Let's not see Him as our get-rich-quick scheme. Let's not see Him as a means of popularity, comfort, ease, security, fill in the blank _____. Do you see what that attitude reveals about a person's heart? Verse 5. It's evidence of unbelief.

The Conversion of Jesus' Brothers

Let's talk some more about Jesus' brothers. It's very intriguing to hear some details about Jesus' earthly family. We're told in God's Word that Jesus was born to Mary, who was a virgin—an amazing miracle! So these brothers would be technically half-brothers. Jesus was not biologically a son of Joseph. These brothers would have been the sons of Mary and Joseph.

We find the names of these brothers in a couple places. In Matthew 13:55 the people are marveling at Jesus' wisdom and mighty works, and they say, "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?" That's not Judas Iscariot, but a different Judas. And apparently Jesus also had some sisters, because in the next verse the people say, "And are not all his sisters with us?"

Similarly in Mark 6:3, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon?" The one brother must have been known by both names, either Joses or Joseph. And this Judas (again, not Judas Iscariot), is also known as Jude, the writer of the second to last book of the Bible, that short letter right before Revelation. And James we know as the writer of James and a very prominent leader in the early church. We read in Acts 1:14 that the brothers were with the disciples in the upper room. It says, "All these with one accord were devoting

themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.”

Now, in light of what we’re seeing in John 7, let me show you something really cool in the New Testament books of James and Jude. You can look this up later today. Look at the way James and Jude begin their letters. James introduces himself in this way in the first verse of his letter, “James, a servant (of slave) of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

And Jude says this in the first verse of his letter, “Jude, a servant (or slave) of Jesus Christ and brother of James.” Isn’t this fascinating!

We wonder here, Why don’t these guys come right out and tell us that they’re the brothers of Jesus? Each of them could have bolstered their authority if they started their letters by identifying themselves as brothers of Jesus.

But here’s what this highlights for us. They both recognized that their *physical* kinship with Jesus wasn’t the most important thing. What matters is a person’s *spiritual* relationship with Jesus. It didn’t matter that James and Jude were from the same physical family as Jesus. What mattered was their spiritual relationship to Jesus.

Do you remember at the end of Matthew 12 when Jesus’ mother and brothers were looking for Him and Jesus said, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’” At that point James and Jude were physical brothers of Jesus, but not yet a true brother. There was a physical kinship, but not a spiritual kinship.

Can you imagine growing up in the same home as Jesus? Some of us may have had “perfect” siblings (at least in our parents’ eyes), but in this case it was really true. James and Jude grew up with an older brother who was sinless and perfect. But, still, they couldn’t see it. They couldn’t see that—mystery of mysteries and wonder of wonders—the long-awaited Messiah, the God-Man, was dwelling with them under the same roof. Doesn’t this show us our depravity and our spiritual blindness? People may say, If I was there to see Jesus walk on the water and feed the 5,000 . . . If I was there to see Him come out of the tomb, then I would believe. No you wouldn’t! Not unless God opens up the eyes of your heart to see the truth of the Gospel. These brothers grew up living in the same home as Jesus, and they didn’t know what was going on. Not until later were their eyes opened to His true identity.

This is also a reminder that no one should assume they’re a Christian simply because their parents are Christians, or they have

a brother or sister who is a Christian. God doesn't have any grandchildren, or nieces or nephews, or sons-in-law or daughters-in-law. He has sons and daughters who have a personal spiritual relationship with Him. James and Jude don't mention their earthly family relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ, because that was insignificant in light of their spiritual relationship to the Lord. They don't identify themselves as brothers of Jesus, but rather as slaves of Jesus. And this shows us what a radical transformation has occurred in their lives.

James Edwards, a biblical scholar, in a commentary on Mark, makes this observation about Jesus' earthly family. He says, "exposure to Jesus and the gospel is no guarantee of faith; indeed, apart from faith, exposure to the gospel inoculates as often as it enlivens."²

This shows the necessity of faith, and the necessity of God to sovereignly grant that faith. Our hearts are naturally inclined away from faith in God. And what we're seeing here is that familiarity with Jesus does not make a person more inclined to believe. In fact, many times it works in the opposite way. Familiarity often makes a person more inclined to misunderstand Jesus, to take Him for granted, to treat Him as a means to an end rather than the ultimate treasure.

Salvation is never automatic. And we should be reminded, parents, that it's never a guarantee that the parent's faith will become the children's faith. It's never a guarantee that the children in the Sunday School classes are going to be saved. It's a miracle every time a person repents and believes, whether that person grows up in the best of Christian homes, or hears the Gospel for the first time at age 85 in a remote, unreached area of the world. There's no formula we can follow that will guarantee salvation. Many times those whom we think most likely to believe, don't. And many times those whom we think least likely to believe, do.

So many things about faith and salvation seem to go directly against our human ways of thinking. And God delights to do things in His own way, rather than in our ways, because it reminds us again and again that He's in control, and He gets all the glory. Salvation is from the Lord.

We know from John 7:5 that his brothers did not believe in Him. At least, during His earthly ministry they did not believe in Him. But it is an amazing testimony to the power of the Gospel that his brothers later did believe in Him.

² James Edwards, *Mark*, page 174.

Jesus Sent from the Father and Submissive to the Father

Well, coming back to the narrative of John 7, we see that Jesus deliberately distances Himself from His brothers, who were still unbelievers at this point. He is not going to be used. He is not going to submit to their plans for Him. He submits to the Father. He submits to the Father entirely and exclusively. If Jesus went to Jerusalem at this moment along with His brothers, it could have been that something like the triumphal entry would have happened, setting in motion the kinds of things that happened in that final week leading to His crucifixion. And Jesus knows that is coming. But He also knows that it's not quite time.

A kind of confusion thing in this passage is Jesus' intentions regarding this Feast. He tells His brothers in verse 8, "I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come." And we should note that some manuscripts read, "I am not *yet* going up to this feast . . ." Which would make more sense, since we soon find out that Jesus does go to the feast, albeit secretly. But then later He goes public and teaches openly in the temple. So it's a bit of a curious progression here. First it sounds like He's not going at all, then He goes undercover. Then He blows His own cover by standing up and teaching in the temple.

I think what we see here is that Jesus is on His own program. Or more accurately, He's on the Father's program. He's not going to play along with His brother's plans, especially since those plans are motivated by unbelief. Jesus is on a certain timeline, a timeline which the Father has ordained. And Jesus is walking, step by step, along that path.

As Jesus speaks in the temple, He refers more than once to the Father, the One who sent Him. Verses 16-18. Also verses 28-29. Jesus is a man on a mission, and He has very clear marching orders coming from His Father. And we also see His sovereignty, and the Father's sovereignty, in these events. Because even though there's people who want to kill Him, and would have liked to arrest Him even then, they couldn't. Do you know why? Verse 30. Everything was going according to plan. Everything was on schedule. And nothing would happen ahead of schedule, despite the growing animosity toward Jesus.

Healing on the Sabbath

In verses 19-24 Jesus makes a compelling argument concerning His controversial healing on the Sabbath. You remember back in chapter 5 when Jesus healed the man at the pool of Bethesda, and the Jews objected to it and were wanting to kill Jesus because of it. But Jesus makes this simple rebuttal which shows how ridiculous their objections are. He says, You'll circumcise on the Sabbath. You have to. The law requires it.

Baby boys were to be circumcised on the 8th day (Leviticus 12:3). And if the 8th day happened to be a Sabbath, the circumcision would take place on the Sabbath. Jesus is saying, that being the case, how absurd that you would be angry with me for healing someone on the Sabbath!

Who Do You Say He Is?

Now, I want to close by coming back to the question, Who do you say that He is? In verse 12 people are speculating, debating about Him. In verses 25-27 there's more debate and speculation. Some thought that the Messiah would be completely unknown when he arrived. Therefore, they thought Jesus couldn't be the Messiah, since people knew about Him and where He was from.

But then verse 31 comes to an encouraging sign, that many did believe in Him. They had eyes to see the signs and what the signs were indicating. They didn't just see the miracles as a cool display of power, something to rally the crowds. They say what the sign was pointing to, the fact that Jesus is the Anointed One of God.

Christos is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew term Messiah, which means anointed one. We have to understand that Christ is not Jesus' last name. When the Bible refers to Jesus Christ, that's not like saying John Doe as if Christ was His family name. Christ is His title. Christ means Messiah, Anointed One.

In closing, where do you find yourself in these events? What is your response to the question, Who is He? Could this man be the Messiah?

Are you like the unbelieving brothers? Maybe you see Jesus as a means to an end, an opportunity to get rich and famous. Or are you like the Jewish leaders who want to kill Jesus? Maybe you see Jesus as a threat to your autonomy, a threat to your routine. You're scared because He would turn your life upside down, and you don't want to give Him that control. Or have you come to believe in Him? By God's grace, have you come to see that He is the Messiah? His miraculous works and His divine, authoritative words demonstrate that He is the long-awaited anointed One, the Son of God, the One sent from the Father. He's the One who lived a perfect, sinless life and died as the Passover Lamb to atone for our sin. And He rose from the grave on the 3rd day!

He's not merely a good man, as some have thought Him to be. Verse 12, there were those who said, "He is a good man." Nor is He a liar, as others thought Him to be. Also in verse 12, those who said, "No, he is leading the people astray." Nor is He a lunatic, or demon-possessed. As those in verse 20 thought, "You have a demon!"

No, He is not merely a good man, not a liar, or a lunatic. He is Lord of all. He is the Christ, the Messiah. He teaches with authority. He performs miracles that demonstrate His authority over creation. There is only one explanation for this: He is, in fact, sent from the Father, One with the Father. He is divine, and He is the only One who can fully atone for our sin, which He did on the cross. And that's exactly where He's heading as we'll continue to follow the unfolding story in the Gospel of John.

Whatever trials or temptations you've faced in recent weeks, I encourage, I exhort you, to put your hope in this Savior. Recognize Him for who He is. Take Him at His word. And follow Him as one of His disciples. One of His disciples who, like Peter, sees that there is no other place to go. There is no Savior like Him.