

John 5:31–47

Introduction

Jesus has just taken us into that holy place where we see the true nature of His equality with God – an equality that’s *revealed* in the Son’s subordination to and dependence upon the Father. The Son always and only does the works that He sees the Father doing because the Father loves the Son and shows Him all that He Himself is doing (5:19-20). “As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom He will” (5:21), and this is so because “as the Father has *life in himself*, so He has *granted* the Son also to have *life in Himself*” (5:26). The oneness of God is revealed in the Son so that the Son is to be honored even as the Father is honored (5:23) and so that we can know that in Him we have eternal life (5:24).

But why should we believe what this man is saying about Himself? If we believed the claims that every man made for himself, wouldn’t that make us gullible and naïve? How can these claims of Jesus be “verified”? The Jews wanted “independent,” “objective” testimony and evidence. So Jesus answers beginning in verse 31:

I. John 5:31 — “If I bear witness [*martyreo*] about myself, my testimony [*martyria*] is not true.”

Is Jesus saying that whatever He says about Himself isn’t true? Later, He says:

- John 8:14 (cf. 3:11, 32) — “Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going.”

Jesus isn’t saying that His own testimony has no validity. Without the testimony of Jesus about Himself—if Jesus was silent, or if Jesus denied these things, or if His testimony was self-contradictory—we would have no basis for believing the things we believe. Without the testimony of Jesus, our faith could only be a delusion. So what does Jesus mean when He says, “If I bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true”?

We have to understand this in the light of what He’s just said about never doing anything “*from Himself*” (5:19, 30). We could give the sense like this: “If I bear witness about Myself, *by Myself* or *from Myself*, My testimony is not true.” Which is to say: “If I am bearing witness about myself *apart from the Father bearing the same witness*, then My own witness could not possibly be true.” Can you see why this is? If Jesus Himself bears witness that He does always and only *what He sees the Father doing*, then what must the Father be doing according to Jesus’ own testimony?—The Father must also be bearing witness about the Son! Therefore, if the Father is not bearing witness about Jesus, as the Son, then the testimony of Jesus cannot possibly be true.

Are you seeing even a little more clearly now what we mean when we speak of the *infinite perfections* of the Son’s subordination to and dependence upon the Father? Even Jesus’ own witness about Himself, He says, is not from Himself, but is rather the testimony that He sees and hears the Father bearing. So what does this *mean* for the Jews and their demand for “independent,” “objective” testimony and evidence? Jesus goes on to say in verse 32:

II. John 5:32 — “There is another who bears witness [*martyreo*] about me, and I know that the testimony [*martyria*] that he bears [*martyreo*] about me is true.”

Isn't the point here to tell us why *we* can believe and how *we* can know that the testimony of Jesus about Himself is true? And yet what does Jesus say? “There is *another* who bears witness about Me, and *I know* that the testimony that He bears about Me is true.” There is a sense in which we're being excluded here. Only the Son has seen and heard “firsthand” the testimony that the Father bears about Him and that the Father has been bearing even from all eternity (cf. Jn. 1:18; 3:12, 32).

What if, in order to authenticate or “prove” the truthfulness of His own word, Jesus had appealed to some other testimony that could be verified by you and me? That could only prove to us that His testimony was *not* true. Can you see why this is? Where is the “independent testimony” that can speak to us authoritatively of the equality of the Son with the Father as a revelation of the oneness of God? Where is the “independent testimony” that can claim a first-hand “seeing” and “hearing” of the eternal witness that the Father bears to the Son? And where else has the Father revealed Himself and the works that He does—including even the witness that He bears about the Son—more fully and more finally than *in the Son*? When Jesus says, “If I bear witness about Myself [‘from Myself’], My testimony is not true,” His point is not that a combination of various other witnesses should independently prove His testimony to be true. His point is that the truth of His testimony depends only upon the fact that it's the self-same testimony that He sees and hears the Father bearing about Him.

Jesus refuses to make Himself beholden to the affirmation of men based on any external evidence or “proof” because this would be to deny His own testimony and the testimony of the Father. It's for this reason that the Christian faith can never finally be rationalistically “proven” by our own study and research. This is one reason why no unbeliever can ever be “reasoned” into the Christian faith. The Christian faith is founded upon truths that do not contradict the “evidence,” but that ultimately stand far *above* all “independent” forms of verification. This humbles the pride of men. This humbles all our confidence in our own intellect – even the intellect that God has given us. This exalts God as the source of all true “knowledge.” And yet once we've *believed* the *testimony* of the Father revealed in the Son, *then* we will see that nothing is more “rational” than the incomprehensible mysteries upon which our faith is founded. *Then* we will see that every other substitute for the Christian faith can only be “irrational.”*

We said there's a sense in which Jesus' words exclude us (“*I know...*”). But if the testimony of the Father is revealed in the Son who does only what He sees the Father doing, then there's another sense in which we're not at all excluded! “[Jesus'] witness is... not simply his own witness; it *is* the witness of the Father” (Carson).

We've seen in these words how Jesus refuses to make Himself dependent on the affirmation of men based on any external evidence or “proof.” Can we also see in these words how satisfied Jesus is in the testimony that the Father bears about Him? “There is *another* who bears witness

* This isn't the same thing as rationally “proving” the Christian faith because that would be a denial of Christianity as a “*revealed*” faith founded upon incomprehensible *mystery*; but it is to say that only the incomprehensible *mystery* of the Christian faith as it has been *revealed* to us is finally rational.

about me, and *I know* that the testimony that *he bears* about me is *true*.” The testimony of the Father is “*enough*” for Jesus. Jesus isn’t just saying, “*I know, even if you don’t,*” He’s saying, “*I know, and that is all My delight and satisfaction.*” Even if Jesus teaches that men should honor the Son just as they honor the Father, He does this not in a “self-promoting,” “self-exalting” way, but only as a direct result of His desire that *the Father* should be truly honored and that the word that *the Father* has spoken in the Son should be truly believed.

Are you seeing the perfect consistency of Jesus’ testimony – not just of His words, but of His whole life? And are you seeing in this perfect consistency of His testimony not just something rational, but something beautiful and something wonderful?

But now Jesus introduces another “category” of testimony:

III. John 5:33–35 — “You sent to John, and he has borne witness [*martyreo*] to the truth. Now I do not receive testimony [*martyria*] from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. *That one*[†] [by virtue of his testimony] was the lamp that is burning and shining, and you were willing to rejoice for a time in his light.”

Why, after all that Jesus has just said about the testimony of the Father, should Jesus “suddenly” introduce the testimony of John? If Jesus doesn’t receive testimony from man why does He introduce the testimony of a man?

The Jews were demanding some external witness and testimony to Jesus (ostensibly) so they could satisfy themselves—independently of Jesus—about the truth of Jesus’ claims; and at the same time they were claiming that there was no other that bore witness to Jesus – that Jesus was alone in bearing witness to Himself (cf. Jn. 8:13). So what does Jesus do first? He first tells them that there is no independent witness or evidence that can grant them the kind of certainty (which isn’t really certainty at all) they are demanding. If they can’t recognize the work, and the voice, and the revelation of God in Jesus Himself, they’ll never be persuaded of it by some other independent means (paraphrasing Ridderbos).

But having established that what the Jews are demanding is both impossible and irrational, Jesus then exposes their hypocrisy in claiming that there was no other who bore witness to Him. “*You [emphatic] sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth [to Me]... you [emphatic] were willing [even] to rejoice for a time in his light*” (John 1:19-37; cf. 1:6-8, 15; 3:22-30). The Jews never quite knew what to do with John the Baptist (Mat. 21:23-27), except to dismiss him as a deranged man (cf. Mat. 11:18). But the fact is that he had borne explicit testimony to Jesus and the fact is that at first they had rejoiced in the appearance of another prophet from God. So what was it that made them change their minds? Why, when they said there was no one else who bore witness to Jesus, were they choosing to forget John? But even if they admit that John testified about Jesus, why should they believe John? Is Jesus saying that the testimony of John ought to be more convincing than His own? Is Jesus saying that John’s testimony is needed to independently verify His own? The testimony of John was “independent” only in the sense that it was not the testimony of Jesus Himself. But the legitimacy of John’s testimony was wholly dependent upon

[†] The Greek demonstrative pronoun is setting us up for the contrast that is introduced in verse 36 with *de* (translated here as an adversative, “but”).

that one to whom He bore witness. John was “the lamp,” Jesus says, “that is burning and shining.” A lamp can only “shine” by “burning” fuel. The lamp is not itself the light. John is “*the*” lamp that outshines all previous lamps (all the previous Old Testament prophets), but this is only because of his proximity to the “true light” (Jn. 1:9). Remember what we read in chapter one:

- John 1:7–8 — [John] came as a witness, to *bear witness about the light*, that all might believe through him. *He was not the light*, but came to *bear witness about the light*.

Can you see what this means? If John was a burning and shining *lamp*, this could only be because of the *light* to which he was bearing witness. This is why Jesus can say that He reminds the Jews of the testimony of John “*so that you may be saved*”; because the testimony of John depends entirely on the testimony of Jesus—because the testimony of John is validated and confirmed by the testimony of Jesus. Now maybe we can grasp more fully what Jesus says:

“You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Now I do not receive testimony] from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. *That one* was the lamp that is burning and shining, and you were willing to rejoice for a time in his light.”

IV. John 5:36 — “But the testimony [*martyria*] that I [emphatic] have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness [*martyreo*] about me that the Father has sent me.”

What are these “works” that the Father gave Jesus to accomplish? Jesus said in chapter four:

- John 4:34 — “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to **accomplish his work**.”

Jesus said here in chapter five:

- John 5:19–20 — “Truly, truly, I say to you, 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. And greater **works** than these will he show him, so that you may marvel.”

The “works” that the Father has given Jesus to accomplish are revealed in the sum-total of His whole life and ministry. Jesus didn’t come on the scene making random, isolated claims. His claims were consistently embodied in every single deed that He did and in every single word that He spoke. Therefore, Jesus says, the very works that He is doing—being the works that the Father has given Him to accomplish—these very works bear witness about Him that the Father has sent Him.

Jesus did not come asking us to make “blind leaps of faith.” But He did come requiring us to humble ourselves before the testimony of the Father revealed in the testimony of the Son. This helps us understand what Jesus says next:

V. John 5:37–38 — “And the Father who sent me, He has borne witness [*martyreo*] about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word [His testimony about me] abiding in you, **for you do not believe the one whom he has sent.**”

Our rationality and intellect is not the ground of our faith in the testimony of God. If that were the case, then the greatest and the strongest Christians would be those who are the smartest and the most intellectual. But, in fact, the smartest and most intellectual Christians are often the ones most given to arrogance and pride and at the same time the ones who are most blinded to their arrogance and pride (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1). The only “true” knowledge is the kind that’s grounded in a humble, childlike faith in the testimony of God. So Jesus prays in Matthew chapter eleven:

➤ Matthew 11:25 — “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.”

And He says in Matthew twenty-one (quoting Psalm 8):

➤ Matthew 21:16 — “Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise.”

After beginning with the testimony of the Father, and then introducing the testimony of John, and then returning to the testimony of the Father revealed in the works that the Father gave Jesus to accomplish, Jesus now introduces the testimony of the Scriptures.

VI. John 5:39–40 — “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness [*martyreo*] about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”

If John the Baptist was a “lamp that is burning and shining,” then what about the whole prophetic witness of the Old Testament Scriptures? The Apostle Peter says:

➤ 2 Peter 1:19 — And we have the prophetic word [Genesis to Malachi] more fully confirmed [in the coming of Christ to whom that word testifies; cf. 2 Pet. 1:16-18], to which you will do well to pay careful attention as to a **lamp shining** in a dark place...

The testimony of the Hebrew Scriptures is “independent” in the sense that they’re not the testimony of *Jesus* (the *incarnate* Son) Himself (see 1 Pet. 1:11) but are rather bearing witness *to* and *about* Jesus. And yet the Scriptures are themselves “confirmed” *by* the testimony of Jesus – which is the testimony of the Father. If the Scriptures are a “lamp shining in a dark place,” this can only be because of that one “true light” to which they bear witness. The lamp of Scripture shines because it’s shining with the light of Christ. It’s in this sense that the Hebrew Scriptures are not “independent” testimony at all, but are rather wholly bound up with the testimony of Jesus.

The Jews sent to John who bore witness to Jesus and even rejoiced for a time in his light; but then they changed their minds about John. *Why was this?* The Jews searched the Scriptures that

bore witness to Jesus, and yet they refused to come to Jesus in order that they might have life. *Why was this?* The real answer, Jesus says, is this:

VII. John 5:41a — “I do not receive glory from men.”

This is the ultimate rebuke to all our pride. And here, too, all our pride is exposed.

In verse 34, Jesus says: “I do not receive testimony from man.” John did testify to Jesus, but Jesus never delighted Himself in or congratulated Himself upon receiving the witness of John. He never found in John’s testimony any validation of His own identity and ministry. The Jews interpreted this as arrogance precisely because they loved man’s approval and were always “try[ing] to impress each other and... let[ting] themselves be impressed by each other” (Ridderbos). But Jesus didn’t play by those rules. Jesus didn’t need them to be “impressed” with Him (cf. 6:15) and He, in turn, was never “impressed” with them. It’s not that Jesus was “too good” for them or that He was writing them off, but only that the Father’s testimony was the only “validation” Jesus needed and, in fact, the only “validation” there was. For this reason the Jews refused to come to Jesus, because Jesus didn’t play by their rules—by *our* rules; because Jesus did not receive glory from men; because Jesus was satisfied wholly and only in the testimony of the Father about Him. If we’re receiving glory from men—if we’re always “try[ing] to impress each other and... let[ting] ourselves be impressed by each other”—how can we possibly believe in Jesus?

VIII. John 5:41b–44 — “But I know you, that you do not have the love of God within yourselves. I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name [if he comes playing by your rules, seeking to impress you and being impressed by you], you will receive 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 we have the true love of God within ourselves *or* do we receive glory from one another? Do we desire or in any way depend upon glory from one another *or* are we satisfied only with the glory that comes from the only God (Deut. 6:4-5)—with the honor and the “validation” of the eternal life that He gives?

We have to be careful here. This will look very different in us than it looks in Jesus because the testimony that the Father bears about Jesus is not the testimony that He bears about us. The glory that the Father has given to Jesus is not the glory that He gives to us. We can never say as Jesus said, “I can do nothing from Myself, but only what I see the Father doing” (cf. 5:19, 30). So when *we* have the love of God within ourselves, that’s when we’ll be free to humble ourselves before one another—to receive council from one another and accept correction from one another—precisely because we’re seeking the glory that comes from the only God.

The Jews refused to come to Jesus because Jesus refused to play by their rules – because He wouldn’t receive testimony from men or glory from men. They concluded from this that *Jesus* was a self-promoting fraud when, in fact, if they had truly been seeking the glory that comes from the only God they would have concluded the opposite. They would have seen *in the testimony of Jesus*, the self-evidencing power of the Father’s own testimony to His Son, and they

would have believed. But because they received glory from one another, therefore their hearts were blinded to the testimony of God. So Jesus concludes in verses 45-47:

IX. John 5:45-47 — “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”

The Jews had turned even the Law of Moses into a means of satisfying their craving for the approval of men. May we not do the same thing with these Scriptures. Because the Jews had done this, therefore Moses himself would be their accuser and they would be left with no excuse. The testimony of God leaves us *all* without excuse. At the final judgment, it will be the sinner’s love of receiving glory from men that condemns him because it was this love that kept him from ever believing. In the same way, the one who does truly believe will never be able to say that He believed because he verified the testimony of God, but only because God mercifully changed His heart, causing Him to seek the glory that comes from the only God and therefore enabling Him to receive the self-evidencing, self-authenticating *testimony* of God in Christ.