

Jesus and the World

John 7:1-13

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After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill him. ² Now the Jews' Feast of Booths was at hand. ³ So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. ⁴ For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." ⁵ For not even his brothers believed in him. ⁶ Jesus said to them, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. ⁷ The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil. ⁸ You go up to the feast. I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come." ⁹ After saying this, he remained in Galilee.

¹⁰ But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private. ¹¹ The Jews were looking for him at the feast, and saying, "Where is he?" ¹² And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, "He is a good man," others said, "No, he is leading the people astray." ¹³ Yet for fear of the Jews no one spoke openly of him. – John 7:1-13, ESV

What is Worldliness? Why is it a Problem?

One of the major themes of John's Gospel is how Jesus interacts with the world and thus how we, as His followers and His church, should interact with the world. Jesus calls us to be in the world but not of the world, something which is reflected in His high-priestly prayer for the church in John 17. Sadly, the church has not always done a very good job of living out this calling and following the example of Jesus.

In his classic critique of the church and pop culture, *All God's Children & Blue Suede Shoes*, Ken Myers criticizes Christian sub-culture and says the church in America is separating itself and hiding from the culture, while imitating it at the same time. In doing so, he says the church is in danger of growing ever more and more like the world while not exerting any influence over the world. In a reversal of the call of Christ, the church runs the risk of being *of* the world while not even being *in* the world.

But what exactly does it mean for the church to be of the world? What is worldliness and why is it a problem? If it is a problem, how can we fight against it effectively? Worldliness is adopting the values, standards, priorities and practices of the world rather than those of Christ. Sadly, many of those who have recognized the problem of worldliness have responded to it with legalism, adding restrictions on top of God's law, taking an external life management approach to combating worldliness. In today's passage, we see how Jesus responded to the world's agenda, unbelief, hatred and divisions and how we can follow in His footsteps.

The passage today picks up about 6 months after the feeding of the 5,000 and the Bread of Life teaching and controversy of John 6. We know this because John 6 takes place at Passover time, in the Spring, while John 7 picks up at the Feast of Tabernacles, in the Fall. So, we've gone from April to October. During these months, Jesus remained in Galilee in the northern part of Israel, staying away from Judea and Jerusalem "because the Jews were seeking to kill Him" and, as He tells His brothers, His time had not yet come.

A. The World's Agenda, vv. 1-5

The line of questioning and way of thinking from Jesus' younger brothers reflects the agenda of the world. These men are the younger sons of Joseph and Mary and include two men who would later become key leaders in the early church, James and Jude, the authors of the New Testament books of the same name. At this point, they are not church leaders or believers at all. Instead, their questioning of Jesus reflects the world's way of thinking.

his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. ⁴ For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world."

Notice that Jesus' brothers are not denying that Jesus has done some great and remarkable miracles. But they may be mocking Him somewhat since so many of His disciples deserted Him by the end of John 6, even after He fed the 5,000. They seem to think He should be more concerned about His popularity. If Jesus wants to be the Messiah, a famous and popular rabbi and political leader for Israel, He clearly needs to go to Jerusalem, the key city of the Jewish people, during the Feast of Tabernacles, one of the largest and most popular and festive of the Jewish feasts. He needs to go to where the people are, while they are excited, so He can clearly show them some miraculous signs and win their support.

Jesus' brothers may be relatively simple men, the sons of a carpenter from Nazareth, but they know enough about how the world works to know that people who want to be known openly and followed by multitudes don't hide themselves away in Galilee while the huge crowds are gathered in Jerusalem. That's just not smart politics!

John is careful to tell us why Jesus' brothers speak to Him in this way: It is because they don't believe in Him. We're not told exactly what they do think of their remarkable older brother, but it's clear enough that this kind of worldly, politically savvy way of thinking does not arise from faith but from unbelief. Jesus is not interested in following this kind of plotting, scheming plan.

B. The World's Hatred, vv. 6-9

The way Jesus responds to His brothers is interesting and, as is often the case with Jesus, unexpected:

Jesus said to them, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. ⁷ The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil. ⁸ You go up to the feast. I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come." ⁹ After saying this, he remained in Galilee.

What does Jesus mean by "My time has not yet come"? Is he referring to the time for His crucifixion? Maybe. But in John's Gospel, Jesus usually refers to that time as "my hour" or "the hour" and not "my time." It's possible, perhaps even probable, that He means "My time for going up to the feast has not yet come." Thus, when He says, "I am not going up to the feast," He means "I am not going up to the feast yet" or "I am not now going up to the feast." But it's still the case that Jesus needs to be careful about the timing and manner of His going up to the Feast of Tabernacles because it is not yet time for His decisive and final confrontation with the religious leaders.

Jesus tells His brothers that they are free to go up to the feast at any time because the world cannot hate them. In other words, as unbelievers, they are on the side of the world, and so they have no reason to plan carefully to avoid a confrontation with the world. Jesus' language here reminds me of the way He instructed His disciples

when He sent them out on mission: “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” (Matthew 10:16)

But Jesus also means something else here: He is waiting on His Father’s timing. He is not going to allow His brothers to order Him around. He will follow His Father’s agenda and timing and not the agenda and timing of the world.

I think two key lessons for us here are clear:

1. **We cannot think to advance the work of God’s kingdom by following the methods and agenda of the world.** Jesus is not a worldly king and His kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world. His agenda and methods are different – determined by God alone and dependent on God alone.
2. **If we follow Jesus, we can expect to be hated by the world.** We cannot seek to appease the world and win its approval and acceptance without acting out of unbelief and turning aside from following Jesus.

Even as these two lessons are very clear from the text, they can be very tricky to understand and apply biblically. Jesus is not acting angrily or obnoxiously. He is not deliberately withdrawing from the world: He will go up to the feast and proclaim the Gospel beautifully and publicly once He does.

Too often, Christians are ready to wear the hatred of the world as a badge of honor, when the world’s hatred may not be coming because of Jesus but because of mean-spirited, intolerant, unkind and aggressive behavior. On the other side, many are ready to throw large sections of the Bible out the window if the world objects to them, just to win the favor of the world.

What we need to see in the life of Jesus is the truth that accommodation and belligerence for the sake of belligerence are both unfaithful and worldly. Neither of them has their primary focus on Jesus and their primary concern with following Him. They are both allowing the world to set the agenda and either accommodating to or reacting against the world. Jesus did not go when His brothers told Him to go, but neither did He react against their suggestion and absolutely refuse to go. Instead, He kept His eyes on His Heavenly Father, careful to do His will. He asks us to fix our eyes on Him, eager to follow Him and do His will.

C. The World’s Division, vv. 10-13

¹⁰ But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private. ¹¹ The Jews were looking for him at the feast, and saying, “Where is he?” ¹² And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, “He is a good man,” others said, “No, he is leading the people astray.” ¹³ Yet for fear of the Jews no one spoke openly of him.

Jesus did go to the feast, but He went according to His Father’s time and privately, not in a way that invited an open confrontation with the religious leaders. This is in stark contrast with the way He will enter Jerusalem in another six months, when the next Passover comes around, and His hour has come, and He enters triumphantly amid a large crowd waving palms and shouting “Hosanna!”

Even though Jesus comes privately, He is known. He is being talked about, though He does not seek to make Himself the center of attention. The last time He had been in Jerusalem, He had dramatically healed a paralyzed man by the Pool of Bethesda, as recorded in John 5. People have probably also heard about His feeding of the 5,000 and other remarkable stories of things Jesus had done.

As always happens, the person of Jesus becomes a point of division and contention among the people. John tells us “there was much muttering about him among the people.” This term “muttering” or “murmuring” is used to indicate a secret debate, a quiet disagreement that can be intense but is not made openly public.

Jesus is the most compelling and divisive person who has ever lived. He did more remarkable things than anyone else who has ever lived and He has been debated, discussed and either praised or rejected more than anyone else in history. Jesus Himself said in Matthew 12:30, “*Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.*” He also said, quite shockingly, in Matthew 10 –

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

But what's interesting to note about this muttering and this disagreeing is that it is not quite so clear-cut or absolute. This is not truly a division between those who believe in Jesus and are His disciples and those who are not. Rather, some people are saying, “*He is a good man,*” which is a far cry from saying, “*He is Lord.*” We might speculate that many of these people would later become disciples, but they are not yet. Others are saying, “*No, he is leading the people astray.*” The fact is that these are both worldly responses to Jesus, and neither of these two groups, divided as they are, represent true disciples. We know this because John says, “*Yet for fear of the Jews no one spoke openly of him.*”

In the world, there are many who think they like Jesus because they think Jesus stands for the things they like. They imagine a socialist Jesus or a Republican Jesus. They think they like Jesus because He's for the common man, and someone needs to stick up for the little guy. Or they selectively choose sayings of Jesus that sound nice – like “Turn the other cheek” and “Love your enemies” – things they'd like to see other people really embrace, but which they often don't seem to think they need to hear.

Look around long enough and you'll see Jesus enlisted in support of almost any cause. But few of those who are ready to say, “He is a good man” are ready to profess Him as Lord and follow Him, no matter what the cost. They distrust and resent “the establishment,” and so they like this anti-establishment hero, but they're not prepared to take up their cross and follow Him.

Whom Will You Fear?

What is keeping the crowd from openly discussing and debating Jesus and what is keeping many from professing faith in and following Jesus is a very common and stubborn problem: the fear of man - *“Yet for fear of the Jews no one spoke openly of him.”*

The fundamental issue of the fear of man is an absolute dividing line and obstacle to faith because we cannot fear God and man. Just as Jesus said that no one can serve two masters and thus we cannot serve both God and wealth, so we also cannot fear God and fear man. We will ultimately live for either one or the other.

In Matthew 10:28, Jesus tells us, *“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”* Proverbs 29:25 tells us, *“The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.”*

These two verses lay out for us the clarity of our options: The only thing that can deliver us from the fear of man is fearing and trusting in the Lord. Nothing else will do. And the only way we will fear and trust in the Lord is through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives.

Consider the change in the disciples that came after the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost: These same religious leaders were still in power. Pentecost happens only about 8 months after this passage, from October to May. Here the crowds are all afraid to talk about Jesus. No one will speak openly for fear of the Jewish religious leaders.

Six months later, Jesus would enter the city openly to the shouts of “Hosanna!” But when the crowd changes its cry from “Hosanna!” to “Crucify!” the disciples all run and hide. Peter denies Jesus three times, intimidated even by a servant girl, calling curses down upon himself, swearing he does not know Jesus. When Jesus rises again, the disciples are in the Upper Room with the door locked, terrified that they might be next.

After the disciples see Jesus alive again, they regain some hope. But once the Holy Spirit comes and fills them, Peter stands up publicly and proclaims the Gospel boldly and clearly to a crowd of many thousands of people. The Holy Spirit works so powerfully that 3,000 people are baptized and added publicly to the church in one day. That’s the difference the Holy Spirit makes.

So, if we are going to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and turn our backs on worldliness, we will need a strong and liberating fear of the Lord. If we are to fear and trust the Lord as we must, we will need the Holy Spirit to change us, fill us and empower us. Thankfully, Jesus said, in Luke 11:13, *“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”*

Jesus encourages us to ask, seek and knock. We ask in prayer. We seek Him in the word. We knock in worship. We persevere until we receive, until we find, until the door is opened, until the Holy Spirit fills our hearts, freeing us from worldliness and the deadly snare of the fear of man!