

John's Gospel - I Am More Than a Slogan

by John Vissers

The sermon explores the profound implications of Jesus' declaration 'I am' and its challenge to both ancient and modern beliefs about identity and existence.

Duration: 33:06

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 8:48-59

Topics: "Gospel Of John"

Description

In this sermon, the pastor reflects on a series of beer advertisements that many Christians found offensive. He shares the story of a pastor who faced a cancer diagnosis and came to understand the reality that his church would continue without him. The sermon then delves into the intense confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, highlighting the revelation of Jesus as the eternal Son of God. The passage concludes with Jesus proclaiming, 'Before Abraham was born, I am,' emphasizing his divine identity.

Transcript

Let us turn to the reading of God's Word tonight in John chapter 8, reading verses 48 through to the end of the chapter at verse 59. John chapter 8 at verse 48. The Jews answered him, Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed? I am not possessed by a demon, said Jesus, but I honor my father and you dishonor me.

I am not seeking glory for myself, but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. I tell you the truth, if a man keeps my word, he will never see death. At this the Jews exclaimed, Now we know that you are demon-possessed.

Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if a man keeps your word, he will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are? Jesus replied, If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing.

My father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you.

But I do know him and keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day. He saw it and was glad.

You are not yet fifty years old, the Jews said to him, and you have seen Abraham. I tell you the truth, Jesus answered, Before Abraham was born, I am. At this they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

Amen so far the reading of God's word and may he by his spirit add his blessing to it. Let us pray together. Father, we thank you tonight for your word, your written word, inspired and infallible grant, oh God, that tonight you would speak your living word to us through this written word by your spirit.

Encourage our hearts and fill us with faith and fill us with the reality of Christ. We pray in his name. Amen.

A couple of years ago, one of the beer companies in this country ran a series of ads that many Christians felt bordered on blasphemy. I'm sure that many of you saw these ads. These ads appeared on television commercials which ran for some time and also in newspapers across the country.

The message was a subtle message, but it was also a very powerful message and very provocative. The theme was clear and it was repeated again and again. Simply these words, I am, softly in the background written in ways that could be read and understood and yet there in the background, I am.

The biblical designation for God invoked on behalf of a brewery. The ads, of course, created a bit of a backlash in the Christian community, but after the backlash died down, what we were left with, I suppose, was another crass example of the ways in which religious ideas and symbols are used in secular and profane ways. But I want to suggest to you this evening that, in fact, there was much more at work than the simple use of this biblical name for God, and that this was, in fact, a very, very well-crafted advertising campaign.

In fact, many people probably didn't realize that this saying, I am, comes from the Bible at all. But what this ad was really saying, I think, was this. You are the center of your own existence.

You are the master of your own destiny. You are your own God. You are.

And our beer is made for people like you, people who can say of themselves, I am. I am the one who matters. I am the one who makes a difference.

I think, therefore, I am. And that's all that matters. Our beer matters, and it can make and help you matter, too.

A powerful message, not unusual in our advertising culture today, and one now that is used to resonate with biblical language and biblical imagery. And the words, of course, ring, these words, I am, ring throughout the Gospel of John. And here, in John chapter 8 and verse 58, we come to the climax, really, of the use of this saying.

Jesus says, I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am. Now, again, we need to be reminded that this statement is, in fact, the climax of an intense dialogue, an intense conversation, a confrontation, really, between Jesus and some of the Jewish leaders and some of the Jewish people, some of whom, in fact, were inquiring about discipleship and wondering whether they should follow Jesus as a result of his teaching in the temple, that he is the light of the world, that he is the water from whom people can drink. And Jesus had been talking to them about truth and lies.

He'd been talking to them about freedom, about bondage. He'd been talking to them about faith and unbelief. And it was this intense conversation which really struck at the very heart of religious faith, of Jewish faith in the first century, and the great animosity that arose between the religious leaders and Jesus.

And it's filled with hard sayings as Jesus confronts the religious leaders and the people with the revelation of God's glory in his life and in his ministry. Now, you'll notice, if you go back to the beginning of the passage in verse 48, that it starts with a very strong accusation. The people accuse Jesus of being a Samaritan and being demon-possessed.

Now, we need to understand, when they charge that Jesus is a Samaritan, that he must be a Samaritan, this is an insult. They are, in fact, insulting him. What are they saying? Well, Samaritans were viewed by Jews in the first century as heretics.

The Samaritans, for example, rejected that Jerusalem and that the temple in Jerusalem was the proper place of worship. The Samaritans also emphasized other teachings and other dimensions of faith that Jews found distasteful. And if that were not enough, the Samaritans were also half-breeds.

They were not pure Jews. They were not real Jews. They were not real children of Abraham.

And so the charge, you see, that is being made against Jesus is a powerful one. What they're really saying to Jesus is, you must be a heretic. You must be a half-breed.

Because anyone who speaks the way that you do, anyone who teaches the kinds of things that you teach, your faith and your life and your identity cannot possibly stand within the faith and within the life and within the identity of the covenant people of the people of Israel and of Israel's God. And if that's not enough, describing and naming Jesus a Samaritan in this way, insulting him, they also go on and say he is demon-possessed. He must be demon-possessed, an accusation that we read again and again throughout the Gospels, especially in the other three Gospels.

And Jesus responds here by denying that he is possessed by a demon. And what we discover, of course, is the passion of Jesus coming to the forefront. His passion is to serve the living God and to further his honor.

And his own glory, Jesus says, is not a matter of his own concern. He's not concerned about his own glory. Rather, his glory is the Father's concern.

He knows that God his Father will look after his life. And indeed, he entrusts himself to his Father. And then Jesus says that whoever keeps his word will never see death.

And of course, this only infuriates those who listen to him even more. And they're further convinced now that he's demon-possessed. They take Jesus quite literally.

I mean, is he serious? I mean, even Abraham, the great Abraham, the father of Israel, the one to whom the promise came, even he died. And even all of the prophets, the great prophets of God, they died. And here is Jesus saying of himself and particularly of his disciples, those who keep his word, they're not going to see death.

But Jesus, as the intensity of this confrontation continues, he doesn't back down. He doesn't back down. He is not glorifying himself.

He says the Father is the one who is glorified, who glorifies him. He says he has an intimate relationship with his Father, the kind of relationship that those who are listening to him can't possibly understand. He can't deny this.

He knows the Father and he keeps the word of the Father. And he tells them then that Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing his day. In fact, Jesus says he saw it and was glad.

Abraham was looking for the day of the Messiah. Abraham was looking for the day when the promise would be fulfilled. Abraham was living for the day of Jesus.

He longed for it. He lived by faith, as Paul goes on to say in Galatians and as we read in other places in the New Testament, that Abraham was a man who lived by faith and who longed for the day of salvation. And he rejoiced in it.

He saw it foreshadowed. And it's likely the reference here is to the birth of his own son, Isaac. When God fulfilled the promise to Abraham and his son Isaac was born, there was very clearly the reality that the promise of salvation for God's covenant people was going to be fulfilled.

But again, they come back at Jesus. How can he know what Abraham thought? How could he have possibly seen Abraham? How could Abraham have seen him? Jesus isn't even 50 years old. And then we come to the climax.

I tell you the truth, Jesus says, before Abraham was born, I am. And what did they do? At this, the text says, they picked up stones to stone him. But Jesus hid himself from them.

He got away by slipping away from the temple grounds. Now, the intensity of this drama, the intensity of this conversation, the intensity really of this confrontation, forces us, I think, to come to terms with some hard truths. Some hard truths about the identity of Jesus.

Some hard truths about the world and the way our world, the way unbelief receives and sees Jesus. And some hard truths about the meaning of discipleship for those who accept the teaching of Jesus in this passage and in other places. So let's look at these issues having placed the before us in this way.

The first thing that this passage points to by way of application, I think very clearly, it points to the revelation of Jesus as the eternal son of God. We're confronted with that reality in this passage in a way almost that is not the case in any other passage in the gospels. The passage concludes with the saying, before Abraham was born, I am.

This is, of course, another example of the great I am sayings in the gospel of John. We've looked at them and we've seen some of them. I am the light of the world.

I am the good shepherd. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the door.

I am the resurrection and the life. Some of them we've yet to come to in the gospel of John. I am the bread of life.

I am the true vine. And as I said last week, the Greek that's used here is an emphatic. It's literally I, I am, ego, a me.

It is literally an emphasis, an emphatic use here, I, I am. And it's deliberately used as a conscious reflection of the Old Testament self-designation for God. It calls to mind immediately the great Exodus chapter three, when Moses is confronted by God in the burning bush.

And he identifies himself as the Lord, as Yahweh. I am who I am. I am the eternal one.

It recalls the great prophetic vision of Isaiah 41, for I, the Lord, with the first of them and with the last, I am. Or again, in Isaiah 43, verse 10, yes, and from the ancient of days, I am. Now, in the other seven sayings, the I am sayings in the gospel of John, that emphasis, I, I am, this conscious self-designation of the Old Testament name for God is put together with something else.

I am the light of the world. I am the bread of life. But here, in John chapter eight, Jesus states boldly, before Abraham was, I am.

No additional word used here. And the statement is working really at two different levels. First of all, Jesus is saying quite clearly that before Abraham existed, he existed.

That is, before Abraham was, Jesus was. This is what theologians refer to as the pre-existence of Christ. But we need to understand that it's not just a matter of time.

It's not just a matter of chronology. It's not simply that Jesus is somehow identifying himself as someone who is very, very old, someone who lived before Abraham lived. What he's saying is that he existed with the Father before Abraham was, that he was with the Father, that he was Abraham's God, that he was with Abraham's God and one with God, his own Father.

The pre-existence of Christ, the eternally begotten Son of the Father, the eternal Son of God, Alpha and Omega, first and last, beginning and end. Jesus Christ, as the writer to the Hebrew says, the same yesterday, today and forever. You see, the idea is not just somehow that Jesus stands outside of time, but that he is eternal, that he is timeless and that he always has been, that he is the self-existent one, that he does not depend upon anyone or anything for his existence.

Quite simply, he is. It starts and it finishes. It begins and it ends with Jesus.

You've often been in discussions, I suspect, where people have said to you that nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus ever really claim deity for himself. Well, here is precisely one of the passages where we come upon that reality. It's one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament for many who would like to explain it away, for them to explain it away.

The claim here is unmistakable and John has presented it very clearly as the gospel writer. It's a claim, a statement about the deity of Christ. It's this very statement about which C.S. Lewis wrote these words.

A man who is merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He'd either be a lunatic on the level with a man who says he's a poached egg, or else he'd 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. Now, of course, all kinds of people would like to explain away this statement. We'd like to get out from underneath it.

There's a group that's promoting a reinterpretation of the New Testament these days called the Jesus Seminar. The Jesus Seminar folk would like us to understand that, in fact, this saying was put on the lips of Jesus by the early church, and Jesus never made this claim at all, so we can just set it aside and not worry about it. Or church leaders who are uncomfortable with this saying and with other sayings will try to tone it down and say that Jesus was simply claiming a special relationship with God, and all of us can have that relationship with God.

You too can be and can have what Jesus was and what he had. But the fact of the matter is that those who heard this tried to kill him. Now, why did they try to kill him? They tried to kill him because they saw this statement for what it was, blasphemy.

If it were not true, it was blasphemy, and of course it could not be accepted by those who were listening to Jesus as true. They knew that something more was at stake than just a nice statement. This passage unmistakably points to the reality of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God.

But this brings us then to the second point of application that I want to raise, and that is it also points to the response of unbelief. Because those who heard this, those who heard Jesus say this, didn't believe him. They'd already accused him of being a heretic, they'd already accused him of being a half-breed, they'd already accused him of being demon-possessed, and now of course they accuse him of blasphemy, and they pick up the stones to stone him.

Now the response here of unbelief is not one of apathy. They don't walk away and simply dismiss Jesus. It's a response of unbelief which is outright hostility and resistance.

You see, the words of Jesus were a direct threat to the religious worldview of those who heard them, of those to whom he spoke. He was challenging their understanding. He was challenging their faith.

He was challenging their interpretation of the scriptures. I mean, he was really saying, do you really know what your father Abraham was about? Do you really know what the scriptures teach? Do you really understand the God in whom you say you believe? Do you really understand the meaning of salvation? Do you really know the truth and the freedom that can be found in the heart of your God? You see, Jesus here is pushing the envelope, and they considered it blasphemy. He threatened their world.

He threatened their worldview. He threatened the status quo, their lives, and they wanted to get rid of him. Now, I want to suggest to you tonight that this is, in fact, precisely the same kind of response that we experience and that we see today, and it's the response that many of us make.

When we hear that claim of Jesus, it sounds, in a sense, like blasphemy to our ears. Some of us want to reject that claim on religious grounds. We want to say, well, you know, there are so many different religions, and they all provide different ways, and those different ways must all go to the same God, and what Jesus here is saying is just stepping over the line a little bit.

Can't we just pull Jesus back a little bit and put him where we want him and deal with his teaching in that way? We want a kinder, gentler Jesus who has set aside these ludicrous claims. So we are offended by the claim, offended like the Jewish leaders were in the first century. It's blasphemous to us, to our secularity, to our pluralism.

It's blasphemous to our postmodern worldview, and so we try to argue it away. But this claim by Jesus is also blasphemy for many people because, of course, it touches them right where they live. It threatens us

the same way that it threatens the religious leaders in the first century, because if Jesus is the great I am, if Jesus existed before Abraham, then it means this.

Jesus existed before me. It means that if Jesus is the one from whom all life comes, then it means that my life comes from Jesus as well. If Jesus is the self-existent one, it means that I am not self-existent.

If Jesus says I am, it means that I can never say I am apart from him. And if you think about that, that's a real threat. And that takes us back, of course, to the beer ad.

The ad would have you believe that you are all that matters, and that somehow this beer is going to help you be that. And the gospel of Jesus Christ, of course, stands diametrically opposed to that kind of thinking at every point. Only the Savior matters, and we matter as we find our life in him.

He is the Christ. He is the self-existent one. He is.

I am not the Christ. I am not the self-existent one. I am only because he is.

He is timeless, and my times are in his hands. Unbelief rejects this, but faith embraces it wholeheartedly. I am not my own God.

I depend on God. And that, at its heart, is how this statement works its way into our hearts and into our souls and threatens us. Craig Barnes is an acquaintance of mine.

He's the pastor of National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., and he describes in one of his books and also in an interview that he did with Leadership Magazine how he came to a powerful understanding of this reality in his own life. Shortly after he arrived in Washington to be the pastor of this large church, he was diagnosed with cancer. A young man, not much older than I am, and he was diagnosed with cancer.

He had to come to terms with the fact that he might die. He had to come to terms with the fact that his existence might come to an end on this earth. But he came to realize something.

He came to realize this, that National Presbyterian Church, if he died, would find another pastor. And as painful as it would be for his wife and his children, ultimately they would be able to cope without a husband and a father. And yes, his close circle of friends would miss him terribly, but they would get their lives in order and life would carry on without him.

And he came to understand that when all was said and done, only this mattered. The Savior. Only the Savior matters.

Only Jesus matters. He is the great I Am. We are not.

And Craig Born says our lives only matter when we recognize that reality, when we are united with Christ, when the reality of the great I Am in Jesus Christ replaces the self-serving and self-centered I Am of our own hearts and of our own lives. And you see, what happens when you become a Christian is simply this. You are united with Christ and all that you are is now bound up with him.

His life in yours and your life in his. And he is the one who matters. That's the claim that threatens us.

Because of Jesus' I Am, if he is the eternal Son of God, then he matters. He matters to your life and he matters to my life. And then finally, this passage points to the reality of discipleship.

Earlier in John chapter 8 and verse 32, Jesus had said that those who hold to his teaching really are his disciples. And in this passage, now the reality of that discipleship is spelled out a little more clearly. There are two things that we need to understand in terms of the reality of discipleship as Jesus spells it out here.

The first is this. Those who follow Jesus, those who are united with him, those who find their lives in him and find his life in their life, can claim or can expect rather the kind of rejection that Jesus experienced, even by those who often claim to be his disciples. You see, this is, as we've seen, an intense dialogue.

It's full of animosity, it's full of vitriol, it's full of all kinds of hatred and rejection. The human heart is seldom so spiteful as when it perceives its self-esteem threatened. And those who identify with Jesus can expect this kind of rejection.

Jesus, of course, warned us of this in another place in the Gospels. He says a student is not above his teacher nor a servant above his master. The great bishop of the late 19th century, J.C. Ryle, described it this way.

He says, once let a Christian take up the cross and follow Christ, there is no lie too monstrous and no story too absurd for some to tell against him and for others to believe it. But let the Christian take comfort from the thought that he is only drinking the cup which his blessed master drank before him. The reality of discipleship involves rejection, but it also involves reward.

And here we end. Because Jesus, you see, also speaks in verse 51. He says, I tell you the truth, if a man keeps my word, he will never see death.

Those who step inside the circle of discipleship, as Jesus described it as we saw last week, those who accept his word, those who keep his word, those who live his word, those who carry out its demands, those who make his word a part of his life, they will receive eternal life. It doesn't mean that we won't experience some kind of physical death, but it does mean that the sting of death, which is sin, and the power of sin, which is the law, has been removed. It no longer has dominion.

And so we have this glorious reality, this marvelous reality, that those who are willing to step inside the circle of discipleship, who are willing to understand that they are only because Jesus is, they find life and find everlasting life, life eternal. The one who says, I am, invites us into that kind of a life this evening. Thanks be to God, for our Lord Jesus Christ, the great I am, who gives us the victory.

Let us pray. Lord, we thank you tonight that your word helps us and challenges us that these are not just truths that we need to apply in our lives, but these are truths that turn our world upside down, the way we look at ourselves, the way we look at our world, the way we look at you, our God. Father, tonight we pray that we might be given new eyes, fresh eyes to see Jesus, fresh ears to hear him speak, the great I am, that we might be given new faith to accept and to believe, to rejoice, to step inside the circle of discipleship, and indeed to know what it is to live in union with him who is the way, the truth, and the life.

So, by your spirit, come to our hearts this night, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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