

John's Gospel - Who Is Jesus Really?

by John Vissers

The sermon explores the question of Jesus' true identity as presented in John's Gospel, particularly during the Feast of Tabernacles.

Duration: 37:18

Topics: "Jesus"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the central question of who Jesus really is. The passage being discussed is John 7, which covers the final year of Jesus' ministry. The speaker emphasizes the importance of understanding Jesus' identity and encourages the audience to take a close look at Jesus and consider what they believe about Him. The sermon concludes with a quote from C.S. Lewis, highlighting the common tendency to view Jesus as a moral teacher rather than recognizing Him as the Savior of the world.

Transcript

It is good to welcome you in the name of the Lord this evening as we gather for worship and as we come to the Lord's table. Let's pray, shall we, as we come to the Word of God. Lord, thank you this evening for your Word, the inspired and infallible written Word of God.

Thank you that by your Spirit you speak to us through it, and tonight we pray indeed that as we open your Word, that you would open our ears and our minds and our hearts and our very souls to hear your Word, to receive it afresh, to be fed from the bread of life, that we might indeed know in a fresh way, in a new way, the reality of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen. Tonight we're looking at the seventh chapter of John's Gospel.

We come to the seventh chapter of John's Gospel, and if you have your Bible, you may want to keep it open before you tonight. I'm not going to read the Scripture just at this point, but others will in a few moments, and we'll be referring to this chapter throughout our message this evening. Let me just remind you what's been happening as we come into this chapter, the seventh chapter of John's Gospel tonight.

In chapter six, you'll remember that Jesus has been teaching the people in the synagogue in Capernaum. At the beginning of chapter six, he fed the multitudes, he fed the five thousand, and then later he walked on the water, and then later the crowds found him the next day in Capernaum in the synagogue, and there he taught them, and he interacted with them, and he revealed to them the reality of the miracle that he had

performed, that he is the bread of life. But you'll remember, and we saw this last week, that many of the disciples couldn't understand this, and many of them could not accept this, and so not accepting this teaching, they turned back and they no longer followed him.

And so tonight then we come to the seventh chapter of John's Gospel, and we come really now to the long central section of the Gospel of John, which encompasses chapter seven through to the end of chapter ten. And we need to understand as we make our way into this chapter that this chapter, and these chapters rather, seven to ten, cover the final year of Jesus' ministry. In chapter six, Jesus fed the crowd, fed the multitudes, as we just mentioned, and it says in that text at the beginning of John chapter six that he did so near the Passover.

And this would have been the second Passover of Jesus' ministry. And the events then of chapter seven to ten take place between that second Passover and the third Passover the following year when Jesus went to the cross, when he was crucified. And so this last year of his ministry is described really in chapter seven through ten and forward then into eleven and twelve as the events lead in to the cross.

And this last year of his ministry was punctuated then by two other feasts. There was the Feast of Tabernacles and there was the Feast of Dedication. Now let me just tell you a little bit about the Feast of the Tabernacles because the events surrounding what takes place in chapter seven happen at the Feast of the Tabernacles.

And it's in chapter seven and eight that we find the events in the temple, Jesus speaking and Jesus teaching during the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. It was an annual festival that ran for about seven days around the time of the harvest. And it commemorated the provision of God for God's people when they were in the wilderness.

And the people celebrated this feast, they celebrated this tabernacle by living in structures that were made of leaves and branches. And a special feature of this Feast of the Tabernacles, there were a number of rituals, a number of rites which would take place during the week of this feast. One of them was a water drawing rite, where water would be drawn and where it would be used in a symbolic way.

And another aspect or another rite or ritual of the Feast of Tabernacles was a lamp lighting ritual or rite that took place each day in the temple. Now it's interesting because in John chapter seven, Jesus draws on the first of these and describes himself as the water of life. And in John chapter eight, he draws on the second of these and he describes himself as the light of the world.

So the events then of chapter seven and chapter eight take place in and around the temple in Jerusalem during the Feast of the Tabernacles. But we back up a little bit because tonight we follow Jesus as he makes his way from Galilee, as he makes his way from Capernaum from Galilee down into Judea, down to Jerusalem to this feast. And soon after he arrived there, soon after he arrived down in Jerusalem, the people started talking about him.

The crowds began to whisper about him. The religious leaders started to argue with him. The Pharisees conspired against him.

And they all wanted to know really just one thing. Who is this Jesus, really? Who is this Jesus who's come down to the feast, who's making all of this noise about whom people are speaking? Where did he come from? What should we think of him? How should we deal with him? And that's the question I want to

underline this evening, and that's the question that I want us to consider. Because what we're going to do tonight is a kind of overview of the whole chapter with this question in mind.

In a few weeks when we return to John's Gospel, we're going to look at chapter seven again section by section, and I'll give a more thorough exposition and a more thorough study of each of the sections. But tonight I want us to see this one thread which runs throughout the seventh chapter and indeed throughout the eighth chapter as well, but tonight we focus on the seventh chapter, the question concerning the identity of Jesus. And so in order for us to enter into this question, in order to raise this question clearly, what we're going to do is this.

I've asked four people to read sections from this passage tonight, and I want us to get a sense of what it might have been like to have been there at the feast as all of this unfolded. And after each person has read their section, then I'll make a few brief observations and try to underline, and I hope what will be a helpful way, the critical question, the issue as it emerges for us this evening. Who do we really think that Jesus is? Who is Jesus really? And as we come to this table tonight, that's the question I want to have lifted up before us.

So Roland first is going to come and read John 7 verses 1 to 13 and follow along in your own Bibles. After this Jesus went around in Galilee purposely staying away from Judea because the Jews there were waiting to take his life. But when the Jewish feast of tabernacles was near, Jesus' brothers said to him, you ought to leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples may see the miracles you do.

No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world. For even his own brothers did not believe in him.

Therefore Jesus told them, the right time for me has not yet come. For you any time is right. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that what it does is evil.

You go to the feast. I am not yet going up to the feast because for me the right time has not yet come. Having said this, he stayed in Galilee.

However, after his brothers had left for the feast, he went also, not publicly but in secret. Now at the feast the Jews were watching for him and asking, where is that man? Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him. Some said he is a good man.

Others replied, no, he deceives the people. But no one would say anything publicly about him for fear of the Jews. After his experience in Capernaum, Jesus continues his ministry in Galilee.

He knew that it would be dangerous to return to the south, to return to Jerusalem, where the religious leaders were already conspiring against him. And so he hesitates, or so it seems. Some of his brothers urged him to go down to the feast, to go down to Jerusalem.

Now the text doesn't make it absolutely clear, but presumably these were some of Jesus' natural brothers, some of his natural younger brothers, and they reproach him for staying in Galilee for so long, in the comparable obscurity of the north. They, it seems, recognized his power to perform miracles. They knew that he could attract a crowd.

They knew that he could do these miracles. They knew that he was a kind of a sensational figure. And so they urged him to go down to the feast of tabernacles in Jerusalem and to use his miraculous powers

there, because people would be gathered from all over Israel and even beyond, and there he would be able to demonstrate his power, his miracle-working ability.

It's not clear why they wanted Jesus to do this. Possibly they saw his flagging support in Galilee. They saw that people were deserting him, as we saw at the end of chapter 6. If he went down to Jerusalem and performed a few miracles at the feast, he might revive his popularity.

If he really wanted to prove who he was, if he really wanted to demonstrate who he was, he would have to put on a spectacular show for the crowds. But there's a very telling word or line in this passage, in this section of John's gospel, it says, even his own brothers did not believe in him. But what's most interesting here is that Jesus refuses to be pressured.

He refuses to do something that he knows he ought not to do. He says, I am marching according to God's time. I will not march to the tune of others.

I am committed to acting in God's time. And so he will not be pressured to go down for the reasons, whatever they might have been, that his brothers were pressuring him to go. But then the text says he finally does go to the feast.

He does go down to Jerusalem, but it says he goes down secretly. He wanted to go down without any fanfare. He didn't want to draw a crowd.

But nevertheless, soon after he arrives, the crowds begin a whispering campaign. And you can almost hear it as the text was read for us, these whisperings that are going out around the crowd, around the temple, as people are speaking, whispering about Jesus. People were afraid to debate openly because they knew the religious leaders were out to get him, and they didn't want to be on the wrong side of the law.

Some said he's a good man. Others replied, no, he deceives people. And here, in the first part of this text, then, we have already before us this very interesting choice, this stark reality.

Jesus has divided opinion amongst the people in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles. He's divided opinion. The opinions range about who he is.

And of course, we need to understand that he still divides opinion even today. Many people, on the one hand, still consider Jesus a good man. They consider him to be a moral man.

He set a good example. He lived right. He helped others.

He was in touch with the spiritual side of his life. He is a very good example for our children, for our young people. He sets a good moral example, and we should learn what we can from Jesus.

The life of Jesus can be a pattern for our own spiritual quest. But others, others consider Jesus a deceiver. He's a liar.

He couldn't possibly be who he said he was, and therefore he is dangerous. Therefore, his claims are preposterous. His demands are outrageous, and his demands will ultimately lead you astray.

Now, the question I want to ask you is this question. How could people 2,000 years ago look at Jesus and come to such radically different conclusions? And how can people today look at Jesus and come to such

radically different conclusions? And is either conclusion correct? Is Jesus a good man? Does Jesus deceive people? Who is Jesus, really? Well, let's press on. Sue is going to read John 7, 14-24 for us.

Not until halfway through the feast did Jesus go up to the temple courts and begin to teach. The Jews were amazed and asked, how did this man get such learning without having studied? Jesus answered, my teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me.

If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth. There is nothing false about him.

Has not Moses given you the law, yet not one of you keeps the law? Why are you trying to kill me? You are demon possessed, the crowd answered. Who is trying to kill you? Jesus said to them, I did one miracle, and you are all astonished. Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision, though actually it did not come from Moses but from the patriarchs, you circumcise a child on the Sabbath.

Now, if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath? Stop judging by mere appearances and make a right judgment. The first response of the religious leaders is that Jesus is an amazing teacher. He teaches and the range of his teaching is inspiring.

We know from other passages in the Gospels that he taught as one who had authority and not simply as the religious leaders taught. He seemed to have great learning without having studied. Jesus did not have the proper credentials, the graduate degree from the Jerusalem School of Theology.

Nevertheless, he had this incredible ability to teach, to inspire, to give teaching which seemed somehow beyond the knowledge of ordinary men and women. Jesus tells them that the reason for this is that his teaching has come not simply from himself, not simply from what he has learned from others, but from God his Father. So far, so good.

But then Jesus pushes them too far, because he accuses them of trying to kill him. And the religious leaders and the people think that Jesus now is not simply an inspired teacher, an inspired and an inspiring teacher, but he's someone who's got a persecution complex. He's someone who believes in conspiracy theories.

They think he's paranoid, and so the crowd says to him, you are demon possessed. And you'll notice what the religious leaders then seem to be doing. They seem to be accusing him that he is breaking the law, that he's a lawbreaker.

And of course, this was one of their great accusations throughout the Gospels, that Jesus didn't, it seems, keep the letter of the law at every point and reinterpreted the law in significant ways. And so they accuse him of being a lawbreaker. And so again, you have this incredible contrast concerning the identity of Jesus.

You have, on the one hand, those who consider him to be a great teacher. And how many people today still consider Jesus a great teacher? His words have stood the test of time. Who wouldn't consider the Sermon on the Mount as one of the world's greatest teachings? The values that he taught seem so right.

Let's just take that part of what he says and leave the rest out. Let's leave out all of this business about his being the Messiah. Let's leave out the business of the cross.

Let's leave out the business of his having to die for the sins of the world. Let's not get carried away with talk of resurrection. Let's have a Jesus who makes sense to us as a great teacher without all of this other supernatural nonsense.

And let me tell you, as someone who teaches in a theological college, that that's the attitude towards Jesus in many, many, many theological colleges across this country. That's the view of Jesus which is set forth. That's who people think Jesus is.

He's a great teacher, but let's not have any of this nonsense about his going to a cross. That's just silliness and paranoia. But of course, it's those very things which provoke the other reactions to Jesus.

For when he starts talking about the cross, they think he's crazy. He's got a demon. And when he interprets the law of Moses, they accuse him of being a lawbreaker.

And here we confront again the real dilemma about Jesus' identity. How can Jesus be, and I ask you this question at one and the same time, a great teacher and yet also demon-possessed? How can he be a good man and at the same time a lawbreaker? Who is Jesus, really? We press on. Gordon is going to come and read John 7, 25 to 44.

At that point, some of the people of Jerusalem began to ask, isn't this the man they are trying to kill? Here he is, speaking publicly, and they are not saying a word to him. Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Christ? But we know where this man is from. When the Christ comes, no one will know where he is from.

Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me.

At this, they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his time had not yet come. Still many in the crowd put their faith in him. They said, when the Christ comes, will he do more miraculous signs than this man? The Pharisees heard the crowd whispering such things about him.

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees sent temple guards to arrest him. Jesus said, I am with you for only a short time, and then I go to the one who sent me. You will look for me, but you will not find me, and where I am you cannot come.

The Jews said to one another, where does this man intend to go that we cannot find him? Will he go where our people live, scattered among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks? What did he mean when he said, you will look for me, but you will not find me, and where I am you cannot come? On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, if anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

Up to that time the spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. On hearing his words, some of the people said, surely this man is the prophet. Others said, he is the Christ.

Still others asked, how can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived? Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him. Now the people are really confused.

If this is the man the religious leaders are trying to kill, then why are they letting him teach so freely and so openly in the temple courts? Why weren't they doing something to stop him? Maybe they've had a change of mind, maybe they've had a change of heart, maybe they think and they've concluded that Jesus really is the Messiah. But none of it really makes any sense to the people. For when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from, but everyone knows that Jesus is from Galilee.

Jesus tells them that he's been sent from his Father in heaven, and this only stirs things up more, and some of the people now try to seize him, and others believed in him. The temple guards try to arrest him, the religious leaders know that things are now getting out of control, and so they try to settle things down and bring things under control. They think perhaps now is the time to arrest Jesus.

But through it all, Jesus keeps talking, he keeps teaching. The religious leaders and the people don't really know where Jesus has come from, and they don't really know where he is going. And on the last day of the feast, it says, Jesus got up and he says in a loud voice, I am the water of life.

He says, if anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within me. And by this he meant the spirit whom those who believed in him were later to receive.

Up to that time, the spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. And so Jesus gets up in the middle of this feast, as water was drawn every day, as a rite, as a ritual of the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus says, I am the real water for which you long. I alone can quench your thirst.

I alone can satisfy that thirst of your soul which you have deep within you. And out will come streams of living water, the Holy Spirit. You remember that this is the same thing that Jesus said to the woman at the well in John chapter 4. Well, how do people respond? Some said he was the prophet.

Moses returned. Some said he was the Christ, the promised Messiah. And the place is now in chaos, and the people are divided very clearly in their opinion concerning Jesus.

And again, these are the same questions that we have to deal with today. And they aren't any easier to answer than they were 2,000 years ago. Is Jesus really the Christ? Where did this man named Jesus come from? And where did he go? And what really was he doing? What was his teaching about? Why did he die on the cross? Was he simply a martyr for a good cause, or was there something more going on? Was he really raised from the dead, and can he really quench the spiritual thirst of my soul? And the question you need to ask is this question of yourself.

If I had been at the Feast of Tabernacles some 2,000 years ago, what would I have done? What would I have thought about Jesus had I been there? Had I been in the temple when this man got up to say, I am the water of life, what would I have thought? What would I have said? What would I have done? Would I have tried to seize him? Would I have tried to eliminate him? Or would I have believed in him? Or would I have ignored him altogether? What would I have done with Jesus had I been there? Who is Jesus really? And then finally, John 7, 45 to 52. Fiona is going to come and read this passage for us. Finally, the temple

guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, why didn't you bring him in? No one ever spoke the way this man does, the guards declared.

You mean he has deceived you also, the Pharisees retorted? Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No, but this mob that knows nothing of the law, there is a curse on them. Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing? They replied, are you from Galilee too? Look into it and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee. The temple guards were unable to execute the plan.

They couldn't arrest Jesus. There was confusion. There seemed to be chaos.

People didn't know what to do, and the religious leaders still did not believe Jesus. Nicodemus reappears here in John chapter seven. Nicodemus is the Pharisee, the man who had an extensive one-on-one conversation at night with Jesus in the third chapter of John's gospel.

He steps forward and he tries to defend Jesus. And so that's really the story in this text. Some people believed.

Some people were confused. Some of the religious leaders, like Nicodemus, defended Jesus. Most of the rest wanted to execute him and eliminate him.

They wanted him dead. Some thought he was a good man. Some thought he was an evil man.

Some thought he was a great teacher. Some thought he was demon possessed. Some thought he was a lawbreaker who deserved to die.

And some thought he was a prophet. And yes, even a few thought he was the Christ. And so you have all of these opinions about Jesus, divided opinions very strongly, running like a thread throughout this passage.

And the question that, again, we have to ask ourselves is, who is Jesus really? As we look at this text, as we see all of these things being said about Jesus, as we see all of these perspectives being put forward, and as we understand that all of the things people said about Jesus 2,000 years ago, people also say about Jesus today. Who do we really think that Jesus is? And what makes you think that way? What influences you to think about Jesus the way that you think about him? Are you influenced by your friends, by peer pressure, to think about Jesus in a certain way? Are you influenced by your background to think about Jesus in a certain way? Are you influenced by your circumstances to think about Jesus in a particular way? Are you influenced by the culture in which we live, which puts forward all kinds of portraits about Jesus, to think about Jesus the way that you think about Him? Do others influence you unduly, intimidate you into thinking about Jesus in particular ways? Are you driven by your own needs or your own demons to look at Jesus in a certain way? You see, when all is said and done, we all need to stand back. We all need to look at a passage like this passage tonight, which says so many things about Jesus.

And we need to ask the question, what do I really believe about Jesus? Who do I say that Jesus is? What do I believe concerning His identity? And so tonight, I invite you as we come to this table, to do nothing other than this, to take a long, hard look into the face of Jesus. Who do you see? As you take the bread, what do you taste? As you listen to His teaching, what do you hear? As you drink the cup, what are you

drinking? As you stand beneath the cross of Jesus, who do you see? Do you see a great moral teacher dying for a great cause? Or do you see the Savior of the world dying for your sin and for my sin? C.S. Lewis wrote some words that have become famous in his book, Mere Christianity, and I can't help but believe that he had precisely John chapter 7 in mind when he wrote these words. Let me read them to you.

He says, I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Jesus. I am ready to accept him 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 is 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 up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher.

He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. Who is Jesus, really? Who do you say that Jesus is as you come to the table this evening? Let's pray together.

Lord, as we come this evening to this table, we pray that we might see the face of our Savior Jesus Christ, that we might be confronted afresh with the reality of his identity and his mercy and his grace and his death on the cross for us. Renew our faith, refresh our spirits, we pray this night in Christ's name, amen.

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