

Greater Witness

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[0 : 00] If you would, you'll find it helpful if you open your Bibles to John 5 page 890, 891. And as you're doing that I just want to make mention of one thing that last fall we met as a church to pray about our need for a permanent facility.

There was no, there were no possibilities that the search committee could find and so we began a six-month season of prayer where we prayed here regularly in our meetings together and in our small groups and in families.

The season of prayer ended two weeks ago at Easter and there are still no possibilities, no real ones I'm sorry to say. However, in the two weeks before Easter there are some tiny perhaps potential possibilities that may be opening up.

And for obvious reasons I can't say what they are. They're not true possibilities yet.

But what's most obvious to me and to the leadership is that these things happened right at the end of the season of prayer. So I think it's right for us to have another season of prayer.

[1 : 24] Call it season of prayer 2.0 if you like. And at this time we'll focus our prayers a little more on those who are involved and that these small, small possible indicators might grow into potential possibilities and more.

So that's what we're going to do. Now, John chapter 5, 30 to the end.

I have a confession to begin the sermon. Last time I preached this passage, I preached all about, entirely about, Jesus' view of the Old Testament scriptures.

And I think you could preach a fairly good sermon on that topic, frankly. It does address that. That's a key issue in it. But it's not what it's really about.

And I confess that what I did was took the passage out of its context. But if we put it back in its context, it is really about God's divine identity and our human identity and how our identity depends on God's.

[2 : 45] And that in Christ Jesus, he offers us a radically new and different identity, which is basically the heart of what I want to say.

So it's one day, chapter 5, and an amazing day, wasn't it? You know, in the morning, you remember back in verses 1 to 18, Jesus approaches a man in Jerusalem who's been paralyzed for 38 years. He says, do you want to be made whole? And the man gives him a completely off answer, doesn't really understand what's going on. And despite that, Jesus, with a word, gives him a complete physical health, raises him to his feet, gives him complete health.

But since he's done it on the Sabbath, the authorities demand an explanation. And Jesus so infuriates the Jewish authority that he spends the afternoon basically dealing with their death threats.

And we've camped on this passage for a number of weeks, and I think we could spend a lot more time on it. And although their reaction is inexcusable, it is in one sense understandable.

[3 : 53] You see, they think he's claiming divine identity. And despite the fact that he's speaking to people who've just said they have to kill him, Jesus makes some of the most astonishing claims we have in all of the scriptures about himself, and all the time is offering life and salvation to his enemies.

Do you remember back in verse 19? He claims his deeds are divine deeds. Verse 20, his knowledge is divine knowledge. Verse 21, he has the prerogatives, the divine prerogatives of life and death, of judgment, of heaven and hell, eternal destiny rests with him.

And in verse 23, he claims divine worship for himself. And the obvious question that you should ask, that we are asking, is, how can you possibly back up that kind of claim?

I mean, what proof can you give? And if it is true, why do so few people believe in Jesus? I mean, why don't these guys who actually saw him raise the guy before their very eyes, why don't they believe him?

And it has to do with the nature of God's divine identity and with the nature of our human identity. So let me take those two points. Firstly, the nature of divine identity. You think about it.

[5 : 08] How could you authenticate such outrageous claims? Claiming to be the divine son of God. You can't do it with mathematical proof, or legal proof, or induction, or deduction.

You can't do it with empirical proof, or... I mean, what rules can you follow? How can any human make a call on whether someone's divine or not?

We just, we don't even have a pinhole into heaven. This is, you know, we can't access God's identity horizontally by looking to each other.

You know, we could line up the smartest people the history has ever had. We could get a consensus among them. They wouldn't tell us anything. I mean, it's... The identity of God is so far outside our standards, and our courts, and our brightest minds, and our experience, and our experts, and our explanation.

The burden of proof is heavier than any human can bear. It's heavier than the universe itself. And, of course, there is only one who can bear this burden, which is God himself, because only God himself knows truth, capital T, and all the truth.

[6 : 15] And that is why, I hope you noticed as it was being read, that the one key term through the first half of this passage is the term witness, testimony.

It's the same thing. Witness, witness, testimony, testimony, 11 times. And the reason is because Jesus' divine identity cannot be established in any other way but through the personal and divine testimony of God himself.

We're not in a lecture hall here. We're not... This is not legal evidence. We're in a law court. Jesus is revealing something deeply intimate and personal about the identity of God.

It's the language of invitation and intimacy, not law and logic. And the lovely thing that Jesus is saying here is that God doesn't speak way up there, invisible, ineffable, inscrutable, inaccessible, but what God has done is he enters into the human world and uses human means by which to give testimony to his son.

He's revealed who his son is, the identity, the divine identity of his son through human words, through humans. And the reason for that, of course, is that if God spoke to any of us directly, individually, we'd be incinerated, right?

[7 : 42] Remember in the Old Testament when God appeared on the Mount Sinai and the mountain was shaking with thunder and fire and Moses said to the people, let's go up the mountain and talk to God.

And they said to Moses, and I quote, you speak to us, we will listen to you, but do not let God speak to us lest we die.

See, that's why Jesus says in verse 34, I don't receive human testimony. I mean, human testimony by itself is just laughably inadequate. At verse 30, I can do nothing on my own.

As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just because I seek not my own will, but the will of him who sent me. This is what he's been saying all along. If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not deemed true.

There is another. He's speaking about God who bears witness about me and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. And then Jesus gives three examples of the testimony of another.

[8 : 50] Three examples of where God gives testimony to his son and his identity by using human means. All of them are humanly accessible. The first is John the Baptist, of course, verses 33 to 35.

And the only reason he raises John the Baptist is because he's trying to break through the icy coldness and deafness of their hearts. These guys heard John. They went out to hear John the Baptist.

They liked him. They thought he was entertaining to listen to. They gave him a few moments of their time. Verse 34, Jesus says, I'm just telling you this so that you might be saved. Listen to John the Baptist.

Remember what he said? I'm just a voice. After me comes one who is mighty. It is the Lord who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, the Lamb of God, who will take away the sins of the world.

And in those words, John the Baptist, God the Father from heaven was identifying to the identity, the divine identity of God the Son. Secondly, he says, my works, verse 36.

[9 : 49] These are the miracles in John's gospel, or as we would say, the signs, or John says the signs. And if you look through the signs in John's gospel, they alone ought to settle the issue of Jesus' divine identity.

A weightier testimony than John the Baptist. Not so much because they're just awesomely impossible for humans to do, but because through each sign, what Jesus does is he shows what salvation is about.

Remember? The turning of water into wine, or the healing of the nobleman's son, or the raising of this guy. And as we go through the gospel, each time it's God the Father bearing witness to who Jesus is.

But it's the third example which is the most important of God's testimony, and that is the scriptures, the writings, and he means particularly the Old Testament.

Just cast your eye down to verse 37. Look at how Jesus speaks about the Old Testament. He says, verse 37, the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me.

[10 : 54] Or verse 39 at the end. The scriptures bear witness about me. Or verse 46, if you believed Moses, the Old Testament, you would believe me, for he wrote of me.

In other words, in Jesus' mind, the Old Testament scriptures are not primarily a human document reaching up to God, but a divine document, God reaching down to us. It's not a collection of the witness and testimony of, you know, the faith of Israel to God.

It's the testimony of God the Father to him. Of course they're human. That's what he's saying. But ultimately, the ultimate source is God. Not just in a general sense, you know, where we flick through here and we get a sense of God.

In Jesus' view, is that the writings, graphas, are the words of God. These writings are the testimony of God the Father to God the Son.

So, the obvious application is that you should read the Old Testament. And when you read the Old Testament, it ought to be a profoundly relational experience as we encounter the living Son of God.

[12 : 08] We don't read the Bible for information so much as transformation or formation as we try and listen as God bears witness concerning his Son. We pray as we read the Bible, Lord, don't stuff my head full of facts, but help me to know Jesus really.

I mean, it's extraordinary the care and effort that God has gone to to make himself known. But we have to go deeper because this is not just a neutral lecture, as I said.

God, Jesus here, is laying bare what is, I think, a particular temptation and threat for us. He's not speaking to agnostics, he's not speaking to atheists, he's speaking to Bible believers, he's speaking to the Orthodox, these guys who have studied the Bible more than any of us.

And they have completely missed the point. They have studied the written testimony of God and they have refused and not received God's testimony to his son and that means that they are lost. Now, of course, there are all sorts of ways of avoiding and evading the clear testimony of God to his son. There's the pick and choose approach.

[13 : 26] Some of you may be struggling with this. What we basically do is we put ourselves over scriptures. We say, look, I love the scriptures but there are parts in it they're just, I can't go, you know, it offends me to think about the fact that Jesus is the only way to the Father or there might be judgment or something like that.

So we cherry pick and jettison what we don't like. But there are other ways that are perhaps closer to home. We take all kinds of things and we put them up alongside scripture like my experience and we judge scripture by church tradition or my intellect or my demand for immediate application.

If I can't see the immediate application of this passage I'm not going to believe it. But I think the most dangerous and most insidious temptation is a temptation specially for evangelicals, for those with an orthodox view of the scriptures.

That is to use the Bible to accumulate knowledge, to build a sense of our own rightness without receiving the person, the identity of Jesus Christ.

Using the Bible as a tool to establish our identity in the eyes of each other instead of receiving the identity that Christ is able and willing to give us.

[14 : 51] Why did they not receive the Father's witness? The answer the passage says is they didn't want to. And they didn't want to because they were forming their identity horizontally.

The audience for their identity was one another. So the idea is the more knowledge they had the more spiritual they'd be regarded. So at the beginning of the day Jesus confronts a man who is 38 years paralyzed and he says do you want to be made whole?

And now here he is at the end of the day facing Bible experts who do not want to receive his testimony because they are seeking their own human identity in the wrong place.

So I need to move into this second point. The first point is about God's divine identity. Now secondly the nature of human identity and I want us to see how Jesus exposes the way we go about constructing our identity.

He takes three quick steps. Look down at verse 38 he says you do not have the word abiding in you for you don't believe the one whom he sent.

[16:08] Hearts are so busy forming their lateral or their horizontal identity they've closed their ears to God. Why? Step two verse 42 because they have no love for God in their hearts really.

Why? Step three verse 44 and I want to read verse 44 for you because this is very searching. He says how can you believe when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?

You see we are made for we want approval and love and acceptance and praise and applause from each other we want to know we're appreciated and worthwhile this is who we are and this is how we form our identity wherever you find human beings doesn't matter what culture they're in this is the way we form our identity in traditional cultures your identity comes primarily from your family from your fathers and grandfathers or grandparents or what the elders say it's a communal thing you slot in identity tends to be given in modern western culture it's all about constructing my own individual identity you must not let anyone quash your individuality you have to find yourself you have to believe in yourself you have to express yourself you have to have a dream and believe in yourself so that you can reach the dream and achieve the dream and the way that you achieve the dream is by everyone else saying you've achieved the dream so ultimately my identity will completely depend on my achieving the dream and of you approving it and there are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches but the key is that both the traditional approach and the modern culture's way of forming identity in the end depends on the horizontal praise of others this is a fundamental flaw in us as human beings living outside the garden of eden our hearts are not tuned to the voice of god's approval but to different voices to each other's voices and apart from christ we do not seek the praise that comes from the only god that's why people cannot believe in christ because we replace the approval of god with the approval of each other we're fixated on the horizontal and it's a crazy thing you know we give the power of condemnation and judgment to people around us people we don't even like or people we love because our hearts are always seeking this verdict of approval david van is a very successful north american author but his books don't have happy endings so he's not successful in north america he's found great fame in japan and in europe and last week i read an interview with him and he said americans and he includes us you'll be pleased to know americans are desperately trying to assert their goodness and believe in it despite all the evidence to the contrary so reading tragedy is not welcome i received this brochure through the door on friday it's an invitation to enroll my kindergarten child into a special program there's a \$150 coupon off so they can get into an independent school and on the back we will help you realize your top school dream and above it it's got achievement enlightenment glory vaklav havel who you remember was a playwright in czechoslovakia who went from prison to become the president of czechoslovakia who's a deeply flawed wonderfully honest writer he died some years ago he confessed this he's talking about being in power he said on the one hand political power gives you the wonderful opportunity of confirming all day long that you really exist that you have your own undeniable identity that with every word indeed you are leaving a highly visible mark on the world yet within that same political power lies a terrible danger that while pretending to confirm our

existence and our identity political power will in fact rob us of them and it's possible to do this it's possible to practice our christianity in exactly that same way studying the bible not to encounter a god but to accrue praise and applause from each other when i was a younger christian you know and i would great tracts of time without even speaking to god i'd always feel before i could pray i needed to do a really good hard bible study to show i was genuine i was using the bible to ease my conscience i was trying to make myself more acceptable to god and the stupid thing is that all that does is makes me deaf to his approval i mean if i just listen to his word i would hear the testimony to

jesus divine identity offering me me a new identity not based on my performance or lack of it usually not based on my achievement or my genuineness but based on christ's this is why jesus has come he's come to give us a radical new identity that's not based on what we have achieved not based on our horizontal applause but based on what he achieved do you know this morning i took out my underarm deodorant and the slogan i did and the slogan on it i did um says believe in your smelf i tell you when i'm putting on the deodorant it's the one time i don't believe in myself you see if christ gives us an identity it's a great relief you don't have to believe in yourself you have to believe in him you don't have to find yourself or become someone you are that christ alone offers us a radically new identity it is received it's not achieved how well just cast your mind back over this wonderful day in chapter 5 because jesus models for us what it is to live for the praise of the only god remember back in verse 19 truly truly i say to you the son can do nothing of his own accord only what he sees the father doing for the father whatever the father does the son does likewise for the father loves the son shows him all that he's doing the whole idea of testimony of witness shows that jesus is living for the praise of god he's not depending on human witness or human praise and god the father delights in him because jesus is the only human who has fully and perfectly lived that life of seeking the praise of the only god and you know why he did it he did it not for himself but for us he came from heaven full of grace and truth he gave up his reputation and on the cross he gives up the rightful praise of god he dies alone rejected cursed he gives away the glory so that we might receive it he goes to the end of condemnation so there's no condemnation for us instead we receive the praise of god he takes to himself our sinful identity so that we can receive his praiseworthy glorious identity so faith in jesus christ is simply hearing the father's voice saying that praise that belongs to christ i'm giving it to you the praise that christ deserved i'm giving to you i'm looking at you as though you're clothed in jesus christ there's no possible condemnation for us you have they're not just a negative thing you have all the righteousness that my son has this is the basis of our new identity children of god sons and daughters of the father brothers and sisters of jesus alive with the spirit not earning god's approval but living life based on his approval his acceptance that's in jesus christ so this is the way our new identity works and i think this is what this passage is about as we draw near to christ we draw a greater sense of our own identity here's the great thing we're weaned off the crushing dependence on the judgment of others and even of myself as we begin to seek the praise of the only god because we know that we are secure in the praise that we've received from him there's a wonderful passage which you can look at later today in 1 corinthians chapter 4 the apostle paul is writing to a church that really is very critical of him it's very interesting he doesn't justify himself but he says this he says you know what any human judgment on me really doesn't matter and then he says my own judgment of me doesn't matter i think i'm innocent but what's really what really matters is the lord's opinion it's his commendation and praise that we're after so verse 24 whoever hears my words and believes him who has sent me has eternal life he does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life late in his life soon before he died vaklav havel was living alone he was abandoned by all his supporters alienated most of them he was wasted with illness moving around his country house an old battered man and as he did it he wrote he tidied everything he kept he kept making sure his table was orderly his books were piled and there fresh flowers in the glasses and he wonders why was he doing this or rather for whom was he doing it and i quote he says it's as though i was constantly expecting someone to visit but who i have only one explanation i'm constantly preparing for the last judgment for the highest court from which nothing can be hidden the tragedy is he did not need to wait for the last judgment to hear the verdict of approval because that's what christ has come to bring to us and i think this is the takeaway for us today that as we daily go to his word and hear the father's testimony to him we grow daily living on the basis of that new identity which we have together in christ jesus amen