



The Gospel of John

Session 16: Jesus and the Religious Leaders

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

This week as we wrap up chapter 7 of the book of John, we'll examine how three sets of people—the temple guards, the Pharisees, and Nicodemus—responded to Jesus's teaching. We'll examine the bullying/persecution that the Pharisees used to silence both the temple guards and Nicodemus in reaction to their growing faith.

As we discuss the idea of persecution, we can and should reflect on ways we might experience conflict at work, school, or among family relationships as we follow Christ. We should also consider other places in the world where Christians are experiencing intense persecution, and take time to pray, not only for our needs, but for the global church. How can we be an encouragement or advocate for others who are suffering for the name of Jesus? What practical ways can we be a blessing to those who are coming to Christ in hard circumstances?

TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

John 7:45-53

THE MAIN IDEA

The religious leaders maintained their opposition to Jesus and attempted to arrest Him, setting up a stark contrast between those who encountered Christ and believed and those who rejected Him.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

What difference does believing in Christ, rather than dismissing Him, make in your day?

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

John 7:45-46 The religious leaders and Pharisees sent temple guards to arrest Jesus while He was teaching. The guards, however, returned empty handed. The reason? They'd never heard anyone speak like Jesus! We cannot encounter Christ and come away unchanged. The Pharisees encountered Christ and saw only a threat to their own power. The temple guards encountered Jesus and saw a glimpse of His transforming power.

John 7:47-49 The Pharisees used three techniques to silence the testimony of the temple guards. First, they mocked them for their experience. Second, they appealed to elitism, and third they dismissed the crowds as ignorant. When belief threatens power, pride redefines intelligence. The Pharisees didn't believe, and they made it their mission to shut down anyone who did. Spiritual pride can even affect believers. When we dismiss the spiritual experience of others, we show contempt for the work of God in their lives. God calls us to humility as we reflect on our relationship with Him.

John 7:50-53 Nicodemus took a substantial risk in advocating for justice where Jesus was concerned. At times, we too will face opposition as we follow Christ. We can rejoice in that suffering. Saying "yes" to Jesus often means saying "no" to the world. God hears and responds when His children face persecution for Christ.



START HERE

For every follower of Christ, there was a moment where their knowledge of the person and work of Jesus intersected with saving faith. Can you recall when that moment happened for you? Was there any opposition from others when you made a profession of faith? There are many today for whom choosing Jesus requires a personal, familial, or economic risk? How can the local church better serve and support the global church in this way? What might that practically look like?

DISCUSS

What is an argument you've encountered around why you or someone else shouldn't believe in Christ? How has this type of criticism threatened or fueled your faith?

REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. Seeing is Believing—When Truth Is Encountered, Not Silenced

John 7:45-46: *Then the servants came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring him?"*

The servants answered, "No man ever spoke like this!"

Unpacking John 7:45-46

Thomas Fuller (1608-1661) was a 17th-century Anglican priest, historian, and preacher known for his sharp wit, memorable quotes, and pastoral wisdom. He ministered during one of the most contentious times in British church history—the English Civil war and the upheaval of the monarchy and church authority. Fuller lived in a time when experience often clashed with what the authorities demanded people believe. Still, he persevered in calling out truth where he saw it and went on to serve as the personal chaplain of King Charles II.

One of his noteworthy sayings, "*seeing is believing*" is too often cut short, diminishing the intended meaning. Fuller wrote, "*Seeing is believing, but feeling is the truth.*" Visual proof can lead to belief, but *the deep inner knowing of experience and transformation*—what Fuller called "feeling"—is often the thing God uses to bring about saving faith.

EXTRA THOUGHTS FROM THE WRITER: The idea is that seeing with spiritual eyes, not necessarily physical eyes, is what makes belief possible. The 17th-century writer I quoted said, "*Seeing is believing, but feeling is the truth.*" He defined "*feeling*", which I quote later in that paragraph, as "*the deep inner knowing of experience and transformation.*" In modern terms, we would use the word "*experiencing*" instead. In other words, belief comes from both the openness to spiritual sight "*beholding*" who God is, **coupled with** the inner knowledge that comes from experiencing Christ.



Like Fuller in 17th-century England, today's text lives in the tension between seeing and feeling. In the last verses of John 7, the temple officers, under the instruction of the Pharisees, moved in to arrest Jesus. But they returned empty-handed—not because they failed in courage or mistook orders. Instead, they encountered something undeniable.

The chief priests and Pharisees wanted Jesus arrested, but they didn't want the crowd that was becoming increasingly favorable toward Jesus to turn on them. So, they sent temple guards quietly. When these guards, men from the priestly tribe who lacked the training of the Pharisees, returned without Jesus, the chief priests were stunned: *"Why didn't you bring him?"* (v. 45).

"The servants answered, 'No man ever spoke like this!'" (v. 46). When the guards encountered Jesus and heard His words, their mission fell apart. How could they arrest someone who taught the way Jesus did? In John's Gospel, we see repeatedly the impact of Jesus's presence and teaching on people. In John 1, Andrew found his brother Simon, saying, *"We have found the Messiah"* (John 1:41). Philip told Nathanael, *"We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law (and so did the prophets): Jesus the son of Joseph, from Nazareth"* (John 1:45). The Samaritan woman at the well, after listening to Jesus, returned to her town and said, *"Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?"* (John 4:29).

Even Nicodemus, whom we encountered in John 3 and see again in today's text, came to see Jesus because of the impact His teaching and miracles had on those who encountered Him. *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him"* (John 3:2). These verses highlight an important truth—we cannot truly encounter Jesus and come away unchanged. For many, an encounter with Jesus will take them from *"seeing and believing"* to *"feeling (experiencing) and knowing."*

The other Gospels record similar responses when people encountered Jesus. In Matthew 7:28, *"When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, because he was teaching them like one who had authority, and not like their scribes."* Jesus's teaching was distinct from the religious leaders of the day, who used their positions to wield power. Instead, Jesus's power was made clear by the authority with which He taught.

In Mark 1:27-28, the crowds were impressed not only with Jesus's teaching, but also with His authority over impure spirits. In Mark 2:12, after Jesus healed a paralyzed man, Scripture says, *"As a result, they were all astounded and gave glory to God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'"*

In Luke 2, we see an interesting interaction between Jesus as a child and the religious leaders of the day. You might recall the story—Jesus and His family had traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover, one of three pilgrimages to the temple commanded by God for all Jewish men. Jesus, twelve years old at the time, was left behind in the crowd returning home after the feast. *"After three days, they found him in the temple sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all those who heard him were astounded at his understanding and*



his answers” (Luke 2:46-47). It’s possible (but certainly not verifiable) that some of the same teachers who were astonished at the boy Jesus later turned against Him during His public ministry. What once was astounding was later perceived as a threat to power and control.

The temple guards who went in search of Jesus to arrest Him were changed by the power and conviction of Jesus’s words. When we encounter Jesus for ourselves, we cannot help but be transformed. Christ alone is our hope of salvation. He is the One to whom the prophets pointed. Seeing is believing, but feeling is the truth when we encounter Jesus for ourselves.

DISCUSS

- *What specifically stopped the officers from arresting Jesus?*
- *When was the last time you felt you truly encountered Jesus—rather than only being informed about Him?*
- *Romans 10:17 says, “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ.” When did the message about Christ first penetrate your heart? How do you keep yourself in the posture of a student of Jesus?*

2. Unseeing is Unbelieving—When Pride Dismisses What It Cannot

Control

John 7:47-49: *Then the Pharisees responded to them, “Are you fooled too? Have any of the rulers or Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which doesn’t know the law, is accursed.”*

Unpacking John 7:47-49

Thomas Fuller often wrote about the danger of intellectual pride masquerading as wisdom. During the English Civil War, church leaders routinely dismissed dissenters not by addressing their claims, but by labeling them ignorant or dangerous. Fuller, who tried to hold a central position while remaining loyal to the monarchy, had to navigate suspicion from religious leaders simply for refusing to conform neatly to political or theological factions. He acknowledged that in some instances there is no room for middle-ground because the opposition is bent on destruction. Fuller wrote, *“It is madness for the sheep to talk peace with the wolf.”* The same truth applies in these verses. The Pharisees did not respond to the officers’ testimony—instead, they attacked their character and the credibility of the crowd.

The Pharisees used three tactics, in quick succession, to discredit the testimony of the temple guards. First, they mocked their experience, second, they appealed to elitism, and thirdly they dismissed the crowd as ignorant. When belief threatens power, pride redefines intelligence. As we look at these three tactics, notice ways we might be tempted to minimize the spiritual experiences of others, show spiritual pride, or seek to separate ourselves based on knowledge or education. Religious pride was nothing new in Jesus’s day, and left unchecked, still affects the church today.



The first tactic the Pharisees used was mockery: “*Are you fooled too?*” (v. 47). The temple guards belonged to the tribe of Levi, the same as the priests. However, they lacked the formal education of the religious leaders of the day. Calling them “*fools*” for their experience was another way to put a wedge between them. As educated men, the Pharisees argued the temple guards were clearly fools if they were persuaded by Jesus’s words.

God’s Word gives us careful instruction on the dangers of disregarding another person as a fool. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls out this posture, saying, “*But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Whoever insults his brother or sister will be subject to the court. Whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be subject to hellfire*” (Matthew 5:22).

When we dismiss the testimony of others, we show contempt for the work of God in their lives. God does not show favoritism (Romans 2:11). Israel was not chosen because of something special in them, but solely because of God’s love: “*The LORD had his heart set on you and chose you, not because you were more numerous than all peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors, he brought you out with a strong hand and redeemed you from the place of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt*” (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). The Pharisees would have been well acquainted with this verse yet still felt emboldened to mock the experience of others. A person who is sincerely seeking God should be encouraged and supported, not ridiculed and shamed. This does not mean we are never to be discerning in the things others share, but rather it is a warning against dismissing the witness of others because it does not align with us directly. What matters most is how our testimonies align with the Word of God.

Not one of us comes to Christ based on our own merit or intelligence. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, “*Brothers and sisters, consider your calling: Not many were wise from a human perspective, not many powerful, not many of noble birth. Instead, God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God has chosen what is insignificant and despised in the world—what is viewed as nothing—to bring to nothing what is viewed as something, so that no one may boast in his presence.*”

Throughout Scripture, God routinely chose the least expected person or people to carry out His purposes. God chose Moses, a man who had difficulty speaking and a criminal past, to lead His people out of slavery. God chose David, a shepherd boy and the youngest in His family to lead Israel. God chose a young couple without money or prestige to be Jesus’s earthly parents, and uneducated shepherds to be the first to hear the good news that the Messiah was born. Our relationship with God should bring about sincere gratitude and humility but never pride.

The second tactic the Pharisees employed with the temple guards was religious elitism: “*Have any of the rulers or Pharisees believed in him?*” (v. 48). By highlighting their position as rulers in the temple, not merely guards, they positioned themselves as the discerning authority. If they had not accepted Jesus’s teaching, why should the temple guards behave any differently?



Intellectual elitism rears its ugly head throughout church history. From church traditions where liturgies were read in ancient languages the people couldn't understand, to selling the best seats in early American churches to wealthy families, spiritual pride is a sin that has plagued God's church repeatedly.

Jesus was insistent that elitism had no place in His church. Matthew 23 is a chapter devoted entirely to Christ's rebuke of the teachers of the law and Pharisees. He accused them of creating spiritual rules that were impossible to keep and then blaming others for their lack of religiosity. *"The scribes and the Pharisees are seated in the chair of Moses. Therefore do whatever they tell you, and observe it. But don't do what they do, because they don't practice what they teach. They tie up heavy loads that are hard to carry and put them on people's shoulders, but they themselves aren't willing to lift a finger to move them"* (Matthew 23:2-4). Jesus accused the Pharisees of adding to God's law unnecessary requirements and then blaming the people for falling short.

Additionally, in Matthew 23:13-32, Jesus outlined seven "woes" for the teachers of the law, including prohibiting people from coming into the kingdom (vv. 13-14), turning people's sincere belief into blind rule-keeping (v. 15), making laws that go beyond Scripture (vv. 16-22), neglecting justice, mercy and faithfulness (vv. 23-24), being greedy and self-indulgent (vv. 25-26), looking good on the outside but living full of hypocrisy and wickedness (vv. 27-28), and ultimately rejected the Savior that the prophets, whom they claimed to follow, predicted. (vv. 29-32).

Spiritual elitism and arrogance discourage those sincerely seeking God, and blinds self-righteous people to their own need for Christ. Proverbs 16:18 says, *"Pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall."* Not only does spiritual arrogance hurt others, it also ultimately destroys the prideful person. Spiritual pride celebrates accomplishments and reduces compassion. In Luke 10, Jesus sent out seventy-two disciples to go into the surrounding areas, preaching that the kingdom of heaven had come near. When they returned, they reported joyfully how many demons they had cast out in Jesus's name. His response? *"... don't rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven"* (Luke 10:20). Serving God through ministering to others, preaching, teaching, going on mission trips, or gaining knowledge about Scripture should never lead to pride—only awe that we are God's children and have the privilege to serve Him with our lives.

The extensive education of the Pharisees got in the way of their faith. Rather than look to God's Word to explain what they encountered with Jesus, they looked to their own pride and drew, tragically, the wrong conclusions. Corrie ten Boom taught, *"Faith sees the invisible, believes the unbelievable, and receives the impossible."* The temple guards approached Jesus on behalf of the Pharisees but refused to detain Him due to blossoming faith. Rather than lean into a lifetime of learning to explain away the miraculous, they leaned into their experience with Jesus. Studying God's Word is a worthwhile endeavor for every believer. In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul instructed the young minister, saying, *"Be diligent to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth."* Our study and



increased knowledge of God's Word should point us toward increasing faith, growing compassion, and the multiplying of saints, as we invite others to know Christ as we do.

EXTRA THOUGHTS FROM THE WRITER: The argument is made that unseeing is unbelieving. In this section, I'm talking about the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees, who had every reason to have faith and "eyesight", but who, through pride and spiritual arrogance, stubbornly refused to believe who was right in front of them. Their "unseeing" was not because they needed to see more miracles—they had evidence of all of them. Their spiritual blindness was a result of pride, not a lack of information or exposure to the things of God.

In summary, section one recounts the soldiers, whose eyes were opened to spiritual things, even though they didn't have a faith background, and the Pharisees, who had spiritual book knowledge and saw the evidence but stubbornly refused to believe.

"Eyesight" in each instance refers to **spiritual** openness or blindness, not to physical evidence or manifestations of the Spirit required to believe.

DISCUSS

- *How did the Pharisees attempt to discredit belief in Jesus?*
- *Where are you most tempted to equate intelligence with authority? What do you know about what Jesus said about this?*
- *How can we guard against creating a culture that makes it hard for new believers to step into our faith community? What needs to change in our own hearts, and perhaps in our small group culture, to make it easier for people to feel welcomed, wherever they are starting?*

3. From Unbelief to Un-Receiving—When Lack of Faith Threatens

Community

John 7:50-53: *Nicodemus—the one who came to him previously and who was one of them—said to them, "Our law doesn't judge a man before it hears from him and knows what he's doing, does it?"*

"You aren't from Galilee too, are you?" they replied. "Investigate and you will see that no prophet arises from Galilee."

[The earliest manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11.]

[Then each one went to his house.]



Unpacking John 7:50-53

Thomas Fuller later served as a royal chaplain to King Charles II, navigating loyalty during a time when allegiance was scrutinized and punished. He said, *“He that will not sail till all dangers are over must never be put to sea.”* Fuller’s life embodied cautious courage—knowing when silence was prudent and when conviction required risk.

Nicodemus understood something about cautious courage. In his first encounter with Jesus in John 3, he approached Jesus under the cover of night (John 3:2) to inquire about the miracles Jesus performed. Jesus, however, shifted the conversation quickly from His physical miracles to the greatest miracle—God’s offer of new life and salvation. *“Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”* (John 3:3). Rather than assuming a posture of religious elitism, Nicodemus responded with open curiosity: *“How can anyone be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked him. “Can he enter his mother’s womb a second time and be born?”* (John 3:4). What follows is one of Jesus’s clearest teachings on the nature of salvation by grace through faith, and arguably the most well-known verse in Scripture—John 3:16. Nicodemus’s curiosity sparked understanding, not judgment, and Jesus was pleased to instruct Him.

In today’s text, Nicodemus again assumed a posture of curiosity: *“Our law doesn’t judge a man before it hears from him and knows what he’s doing, does it?”* (John 7:51). He asked essentially for the Pharisees to be guided by their own law, not carried away by emotion. Ironically, that was the very thing they accused the chief priests of doing—judging without respect to the law.

Ideally, the Pharisees would have responded with curiosity fueled by faith—*“You know, Nicodemus, you’re right. Let’s hear Jesus out. Perhaps we’ve rushed to judgment.”* Sadly, that is not what happened. Instead, the Pharisees turned on one of their own. *“You aren’t from Galilee too, are you?” they replied. ‘Investigate and you will see that no prophet arises from Galilee’”* (John 7:52). Their snobbish reply cast Nicodemus into the same lot as the Galileans, whom the Pharisees deemed foolish and gullible for following a traveling preacher. Their wisdom, they insinuated, would not allow such nonsense.

It’s interesting to note that they charged Nicodemus with the very thing they were unwilling to do—investigate. If they had committed to a more careful reading of Scripture, rather than dismissing Jesus outright, they could have seen the vast number of Old Testament prophecies pointing to Jesus as the promised Messiah. Rather, their religiosity and prejudice kept them from experiencing Christ clearly.

It’s possible at this point Nicodemus realized the Pharisees’ goal was to have Jesus killed, and anything that looked like allegiance with Him would be dangerous. Yet, there seems to be evidence of Nicodemus’s emerging faith in Christ, even in the face of social and religious isolation (John 19:39). This dialogue with the Pharisees points toward an important truth—Sometimes the unbelief of others leads to being *“un-received”* as part of worldly community. The Pharisees used thinly veiled contempt—*“you aren’t from Galilee, too, are you?”*—to make their point. If Nicodemus stood with Jesus, he would be outside of their community of elitism and self-designated spiritual authority.



It should not surprise us that Nicodemus received this kind of push-back. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, *“You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you”* (Matthew 5:11-12). When we make a stand for Jesus, no matter how small, resistance is to be expected, even celebrated, because standing with Jesus and against the world puts us in good company with the prophets and Jesus before us.

Standing with Christ can, and likely will, complicate relationships. Before Christ’s arrest, He foretold of these challenges: *“I have told you these things to keep you from stumbling. They will ban you from the synagogues. In fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering service to God. They will do these things because they haven’t known the Father or me. But I have told you these things so that when their time comes you will remember I told them to you”* (John 16:1-4). Even familial relationships may face strain once a person comes to Christ (Matthew 10:34-36). While our current cultural climate is mostly open to or neutral to faith in Christ, it is not that way throughout many places in the world and may not always be for us, even among our own family. Spiritual opposition is the cost of following Jesus, and we should not be surprised when we meet it.

So, what do we do when we meet derision, prejudice, or hatred because of our faith in Christ? In Matthew 10, Jesus commissioned the twelve for their first missionary journey. He warned them that they were being sent out *“like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves”* (Matthew 10:16). When they faced opposition, they wouldn’t need worry about what to say or what would happen to them, because the Holy Spirit would speak through them (v. 20) and those who endured for Christ would be saved (v. 22).

Finally, Jesus encouraged them not to be afraid, but to trust God who has ultimate control. *“Therefore, don’t be afraid of them, since there is nothing covered that won’t be uncovered and nothing hidden that won’t be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the light. What you hear in a whisper, proclaim on the housetops. Don’t fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Aren’t two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father’s consent. But even the hairs of your head have all been counted. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows”* (Matthew 10:26-31). When we trust Christ in the face of opposition, we become, and remain, God’s responsibility. Lost status, lost relationships, or even tragically lost life for Jesus will not go unacknowledged. Because we have great worth in God’s eyes, we can endure hardships, trusting that no matter what happens, we have an eternal community with Christ and His church.

Nicodemus took a risk for his emerging faith, and the religious leaders responded in opposition. For many, that discouragement alone would keep them from seeking God. Like seeds planted among rocky soil, some experience the tender growth of emerging faith, only to have it snuffed out by intimidation and hardship. Nicodemus, however, seems to have taken a different path. In



John 19:38-40, we see Nicodemus was alongside Joseph of Arimathea, caring for Jesus's body after His crucifixion. It seems, at some point, Nicodemus moved from investigation to saving faith. His part in the gospel narrative reminds us of the value of choosing Christ over giving in to the intimidation of those who do not love or fear God.

DISCUSS

- *What risk did Nicodemus take by speaking up? What kinds of risks might we have to take today?*
- *Have you ever felt like you had to choose between your faith and being accepted in the right crowd of people? How did you respond?*
- *Where might Jesus be inviting you to take a small but meaningful step of courage in regard to sharing your faith?*

DEEPER FOCUS

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

DISCUSS

*How have you experienced Jesus on a level that goes beyond mere knowledge?
How can we and why should we continually seek renewed hunger for Jesus and His Word?
How does continual worship of Jesus prepare and protect us from the criticism we receive from others for our faith?*

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

In Acts 15, the Jerusalem counsel met to decide what was required of Gentile converts to faith in Christ. After their discussion, James said, "Therefore, in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those among the Gentiles who turn to God" (Acts 15:19) Are there ways we make it difficult for people to turn to God in our churches today? What might need to change?

APPLY

What can we do to warmly receive those who come Christ and to encourage one another when we face difficulties for following Christ?



REFERENCES

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