

The Gospel of John

Session Fourteen: The Feast of Tabernacles and Jesus's Teaching Commentary

Leviticus 23:33-44

23:33–36 The Festival of Shelters or Tabernacles began on Tishri 15. It was primarily a thanksgiving festival showing gratitude for God's provision (Ex 34:22) and closing out the agricultural year. The shelters (Hb *sucloth*) were also a reminder that the Israelites lived in tents during the forty-year journey from Egypt to the promised land (Lv 23:42–43). The Festival of Shelters was observed during the monarchy period as well as the postexilic period (2Ch 8:13; Ezr 3:4; Zch 14:16, 18–19) and during the early church period. In fact, Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate this festival (Jn 7:1–15 and possibly Jn 5:1).

23:39–43 These verses cover additional instructions for the Festival of Shelters. This is the only festival where the Israelites are commanded to rejoice before the Lord (v. 40; cp. Dt 12:10–12; Php 4:4).¹

John 7:1-24

7:1–5. The Feast of Tabernacles began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, five days after Yom Kippur. It was one of the three main feasts of the Jews, symbolizing the protection of Israel in the wilderness (Lev. 23; Deut. 16). In this lengthy introduction of thirteen verses, we learn about the significance of the feast, the attitude of Jesus' brothers, and the reaction of the crowds. Public opposition was now in full swing and Jesus' life was constantly in danger.

John wasted no time in establishing the Lord's motive for staying in Galilee; the Jews in Judea wanted to kill him. Indeed, threats on the Lord's life dominate this chapter (vv. 1, 13, 19, 25, 30, 32, 44). Presumably the events of chapter 7 took place six months after chapter 6, since John referred to the Passover in 6:4 and now mentioned the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. The record of chapter 7 begins before the feast and takes us to the last and greatest day. Borchert reminds us, "Tabernacles was a time of camping for Israel. Particularly in Jerusalem, visitors set up booths all over the city in remembrance of the years when Israel wandered in the wilderness. The festival originally lasted for seven days ... but later an eighth summary day or Solemn assembly was added that brought together the reflections of Israel's history and hopes for Israel's future" (Borchert, Gerald L. John. *The New American Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, p. 278).

Jesus' brothers (presumably half brothers all younger than he), still skeptical and perhaps even bitter about his popularity and notoriety, goaded him into making a public display of what he claimed to be. They were certainly right to argue, No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. But their motivation rested in their unbelief, as John indicated in verse 5. They described the pattern of secular politicians—a pattern Jesus urged his own disciples not to follow. Many disciples left Jesus at the end of chapter 6, and the scene reminds us of Joseph's

¹ *CSB Study Bible*. Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017.

jealous brothers tormented by his dreams of grandeur. The Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem was a media event, a photo op for any prophet seeking stardom.

Let us not rush too quickly over the word brothers. Westcott identifies these people as the sons of Joseph by a former marriage. The Roman Catholic view protects the perpetual virginity of Mary by referring to them as “cousins.” Some interpreters do not even discuss this subject, assuming readers will choose the traditional evangelical view. Godet states it very succinctly: “We take the expression ‘Jesus’ brethren,’ in the strict sense” (Godet, Frederick L. Commentary on the Gospel of John, Vol. II. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, p. 54).

7:6–9. The issue at stake here is time (kairos). For Jesus’ brothers, public display of political ambition was appropriate any time, but God’s Messiah was on a strict schedule. Three times the Lord talked about time in this section. Clearly, the time had not yet come. There is human time and God’s time; careless time and precious time; earthbound time and eternal time. At this point in their lives, all of Jesus’ brothers were still in the world, so they had nothing to fear from the enemies of Jesus. He had already condemned the world, so threats on his life were very real. He would go to the feast, but in his own timing and as a prophet, not a pilgrim. Verse 8 contains a key word, though it does not appear in some manuscripts. The word is yet, indicating to his brothers that Jesus fully intended to visit the feast, but not according to the time frames they had set. Carson makes an interesting distinction between the use of hora used in 2:4 and kairos:

The word kairos, found in vv. 6, 8, unlike chronos but like hora, refers in this Gospel to a point of time, but unlike hora does not refer to Christ’s “being lifted up,” to his glorification by way of the cross. If that is the case, then unlike 2:4, Jesus is not saying that the time for unrestrained Messianic blessings has not yet dawned because the “time” of his glorification is not yet at hand (the final Passover was still more than six months away). Rather he is saying that the “time” for this going up to Jerusalem for this Feast of Tabernacles is not yet at hand.

This interpretation is well-nigh necessitated by the final words of the verse: For you any time (kairos) is right ... It is almost as if they are being excluded from divine sovereignty—not that God suspended his providential reign in their case, but that what they did was utterly without significance as far as God is concerned (Carson, D. A. The Gospel According to John. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, pp. 307–08).

7:10–13. So Jesus went up to the feast in secret. As he moved among the crowds, their confusion must have been obvious. Some thought him a good man, others a deceiver. It would have been politically incorrect to offer a public opinion, so all these little discussions took place in private. When we read Jews at the end of verse 13, we should understand a reference to official authorities. Then as now, some religious groups consider it unacceptable to disagree with the official opinions of leadership. Morris reminds us that “the role of ‘the crowd’ throughout this chapter should not be overlooked. Except in chapter 12 there is nothing like it in this Gospel. The term denotes the uninformed majority, wanting to do the right thing but not sure what it was. They are distinguished from ‘Jews’ (which here must mean the religious

leaders, for the crowds were Jews themselves), and also from the disciples of Jesus” (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, p. 402).

7:14–15. Unlike the teaching of the rabbis, the message of Messiah comes from God himself. It was obvious Jesus had not attended official rabbinical schools, so where did he get such learning? Notice they did not ask Jesus directly but discussed this among themselves. Interesting that in just about a year in this very city others would refer to Jesus’ disciples (Peter and John) as “unschooled ordinary men” (Acts 4:13). And this passage also evokes memories of Mark’s words, “The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law” (Mark 1:22).

7:16–17. Although the question was not addressed to him, Jesus chose the opportunity to answer. This was only one of many occasions on which he would make this assertion: My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me. Then comes a verse that tells us both how to know the truth and how to know God’s will. God does not show us his will just to satisfy our curiosity; when we are prepared to do God’s will, then in God’s good time we will know it. Furthermore, only those prepared to do God’s will are prepared to discern the truth of Jesus’ words and the truth of Scripture as well. Jesus disavowed speaking for himself and deflected attention to the Father.

In *The Crises of the Christ*, G. Campbell Morgan points out the distinctive importance of verse 17.

While that passage is generally quoted as declaring a philosophy of Christian discipleship, and while it has that application, it should never be forgotten that the first intention of the words is that of an answer to a question of the Jews, and is our Lord’s account of His knowledge of the things that astonished His hearers. The Man Who perfectly does the will of God is the Man Who understands all mysteries; and is familiar with facts which ordinary men only understand by long effort and study. The secrets that lie hidden in Nature, fallen man with clouded intelligence must search after; but God’s unfallen Man will read them upon the open page of Nature, discovering immediately the deepest philosophies of life (Morgan, G. Campbell. *The Crises of the Christ*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903, pp. 104–05).

7:18. In chapter 1 Jesus called Nathanael “guileless” and now he applied that general principle to himself. In John’s Gospel no one is a man of truth except God the Father and Jesus the Son (3:33; 8:26). Tenney states it well: “Spiritual understanding is not produced solely by learning facts or procedures, but rather it depends on obedience to know in truth” (Tenney, EBC, p. 84).

7:19. Man-made religion can never satisfy nor could anyone keep the law Moses gave. Why should their frustration at failure to keep the Mosaic Law turn them against the Bread of Life? The Law of Moses was clear in its position against murder, yet that is precisely what rested in their hearts during this conversation. In spite of all their bragging, their villainous hearts betrayed their own breaking of the law.

How differently we view people than God does. To us, a person four feet six inches tall standing beside a person six feet four inches tall demonstrates an enormous physical disparity. But put them both next to the Empire State Building and the difference becomes inconsequential. Jesus wanted his audience to stop comparing themselves with one another, or even with Moses, and to look to the righteousness of God.

7:20. Jesus' direct answer put an end to the private murmurings and opened a public dialogue. Apparently he touched a nerve with his reference to murderous hearts. Their response was, You are demon-possessed (8:48–52; 10:20–21). But notice we have changed from “the Jews” in verse 15 to the crowd in verse 20, so the guilt is more widespread than it was just minutes ago. Tenney, on the other hand, attributes the reaction of the crowd to bewilderment rather than guilt. Whatever the motive, they seemed hesitant to hurl the accusation.

Borchert picks up on the intent of the crowd: “It would be the equivalent of calling Jesus ‘paranoid’ today. Categorizing people is a time-honored way of refusing to take them seriously. It is crucial to note at this point that it was the Jewish people who were designated by the evangelist as the hostile name-callers. By the end of these Tabernacle chapters, however, the hostility rises to an exceedingly venomous level, and Jesus' death is virtually assured in the minds of the religious establishment” (Borchert, Gerald L. John. *The New American Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, p. 284).

7:21–24. The message of Messiah, which comes from God himself, centers in truth and justice. Apparently the Lord brought up the healing of the lame man (ch. 5) on the Sabbath and told them again to stop worshiping the day and to worship the God who gave the day. The point of the law is to direct us to Christ (Gal. 3:19–25). Circumcision can be performed on the Sabbath because it is righteous, so Jesus, the Messiah, demonstrates the righteousness of his message by healing on the Sabbath.

But enough talk about Moses—circumcision came from Abraham. It had to be observed on the eighth day after birth, so occasionally it would fall on the Sabbath. Since this righteous act marked purification, why could not cleansing and healing be acceptable on the Sabbath? Godet paraphrases Jesus' point: “It is precisely for this, that is to say, with the design of teaching you not to judge as you are doing—when you are scandalized ... at my Sabbath work—that Moses did not hesitate to impose the rite of circumcision upon you, while introducing into his law this conflict with the law of the Sabbath. Thereby, he has justified me in advance, by making all of you commit the transgression for which you are seeking to kill me” (Godet, Frederick L. *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Vol. II. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, p. 66).

Verse 24 of chapter 7 stands as a reminder for all humanity in all times and places. Human-designed religion lives in the constant morass of such error. The absence of faith creates attachment to icons and holy places. I heard about a sculptor who, on his death bed, was handed a marble crucifix as a gesture of comfort. He pushed it away, saying, “Alas, I made it.”²

² Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).