

The Gospel of John
Session Nineteen: Jesus and Abraham
Commentary

John 8:21-59

8:19–21. Since Jesus had identified the Father as one of the witnesses to his message, the Pharisees asked, Where is your father? Notice the absence of the capital letter in their question. Jesus referred to heaven, while they pondered his earthly origin. But since they had rejected his message, they had no understanding of the Father. This theme runs throughout John's Gospel.

All this happened in a public place, at the temple where the offerings were received. But no one assailed Jesus because his time had not yet come. This important phrase appears seven times in John's Gospel. At the end of the passage Jesus issued a threat that must be proclaimed to all who reject Christ. In human law a clever attorney can create innocence out of guilt and let murderers and rapists go free. But there is no escape from the law of God, no universalism, no second-chance gospel in the message of the New Testament.

One inescapable truth jumps at us from these verses: the heresy that everyone will be saved some day denies the clear teaching of the Bible. There will be no escape for those who refuse the gospel—not in the first century and not today. Three times Jesus warned them, you will die in your sins (vv. 21, 24). Borchert observes, "The use of the singular 'sin' here probably is a condemnation on their unwillingness to believe, but the repetition in the plural (sins) at 8:24 means that Jesus rendered his verdict on their evil actions as well" (Borchert, Gerald L. *John*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, p. 299).

Verse 21 reminds us of 7:34, 36. At that point his opponents pondered whether he would go live among the Gentiles and here they wondered about suicide. In the wider context, John referred to Jesus' glorification, including the cross, the empty tomb, and the ascension back to the Father.

8:22–24. In Exodus 3:14 God told Moses that he was being sent back to Egypt by "I am." Jesus picked up on that phrase, making himself equal with the Father and emphasizing his deity. The Jewish leaders misunderstood the Lord's words and wondered about suicide. Like Nicodemus, their failure to comprehend earthly things left them unqualified to consider heavenly things. To die in your sins means to die with the burden of one's own sin and its penalty enforced by a righteous God (Rom. 6:23). Physical death separates the spirit from the body; spiritual death separates the spirit from God.

Jesus talked about hell here, although his listeners never comprehended that allusion. It is interesting that Americans believe in hell two to one over Europeans. But the percentage of people who believe in hell is much greater in this country than the percentage of people who think there is some possibility they will end up there. Human perception tells us that God made hell for Genghis Khan, Adolf Hitler, Idi Amin, and Pol Pot. Regular people who merely lie, cheat,

and abuse their children cannot possibly be that bad. Somehow God will work out a plan to sneak them into heaven in spite of a lifetime of sin. This passage tells us that those who refuse the light will end up in eternal darkness and there is no escape.

Morris makes an excellent point regarding the kind of faith called for in this passage: “Basically faith is trust. But in our reaction against the view that faith means no more than a firm acceptance of certain intellectual propositions we must not go so far as to say that it is entirely a matter of personal relations. It is impossible to have the kind of faith that John envisages without having a certain high view of Christ. Unless we believe that He is more than man we can never trust Him with that faith that is saving faith” (Morris, p. 447).

8:25–30. Beginning with verse 13, the Pharisees uttered several distinct challenges to the Lord’s claims:

- “Your testimony is not valid” (v. 13).
- “Where is your father?” (v. 19).
- “Will he kill himself?” (v. 22).
- “Who are you?” (v. 25).

In each case, their remarks called forth statements about the light. In verses 19–21 we learn about the origin of the light, in verses 22–24 about the destiny of the light, and now in verses 25–30 about the identity of the light.

These religious leaders asked a basic question of three simple words: Who are you? Jesus had already told them about the heavenly light, but they had no understanding of Jehovah as Father. And they certainly had not grasped that the cross would be the heart of the gospel by providing salvation, understanding, and attraction for believers. This section ends with a reference to the cross and a reminder that the world would know Jesus only after the sacrificial death. Then at least some would understand that all his words were the words of the Father.

The phrase lifted up the Son of Man refers to the way a body was placed on the cross and the cross elevated in public on a hill of execution. Often we pray that Jesus will be “lifted up,” meaning we wish him to be exalted and glorified. But in John this terminology distinctly refers to the cross. Borchert reminds us, “The concept of ‘lifted up’ (hypsoun) in John is the way Jesus referred to the events involved in his glorification (8:28; cf. 3:14; 12:32–34), an expression used to identify his work on earth as the sacrificial lamb of God who died on the cross and was raised up in victory so that all who believe might have life (cf. the important combination in Isa 52:13 wherein hypsoun and doxazein, ‘glorify,’ both appear)” (Borchert, p. 300).

When we pray that Jesus will be lifted up, meaning “exalted” and “glorified,” we must remember that has already happened at Calvary, where he achieved glorification through his death and following resurrection.

This section ends with the encouraging words, Even as he spoke, many put their faith in him. But also for believers, the light of Jesus wants to shine on the problems of life. We should take with us from this text more than just theology of Jesus as the light of the world or even as the Son of God. As God's children through faith in the Savior, we can say with Jesus, The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone.

8:31–33. We have already learned that faith alone does not guarantee salvation (2:23–24; 6:64–66). Saving faith must center in Jesus himself, not just his miracles or some teaching about him. The remainder of this chapter tells us how truth will set us free from false faith, faith in inadequate but attractive objects that often clamor for our attention—relationships, religion, and righteousness. Verses 31–33 emphasize that true disciples are liberated from error.

Some of the Jews who believed in him claimed that their relationship with Abraham kept them from bondage. Abraham's descendents, they argued, had always been free (conveniently forgetting their bondage to Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome). Since some of the Jews did believe, Jesus offered them more truth that could set them free. Now he talked to those "believers" and no longer to the Pharisees, though that dialogue rejoins the text in just a few more verses.

When banks train their clerks to spot counterfeit money, they spend little time dealing with the counterfeit itself and lots of time focused on the characteristics and designs of genuine currency. The Christian's handling of error should be like that. The more we know about God's truth, the easier it will be for us to spot untruth.

The first error attacked in this section is the belief that a relationship with some ancestral figure (in this case Abraham) guarantees a relationship with God. The gospel provides freedom from this kind of illusion.

Prominent in this section of the chapter is verse 32, which has become much loved and quoted. But our text does not talk about sociological or philosophical truth but the truth of the gospel. 8:34–38. In addition to freedom from error, true disciples are liberated from sin. What relationship does Jesus have with the Father, and what difference does that make in his authority to proclaim truth? People who sin—who are in an ongoing pattern of sinning—show that they are slaves to sin. Slaves are not sons and therefore not in God's family. Membership in Abraham's family—or Paul's, Peter's, Augustine's, Martin Luther's, John Calvin's, or John Wesley's—makes no difference whatsoever. An earthly family, despite the power of its patriarch, offers no sonship in a heavenly kingdom.

But Jesus, the Son from heaven, proclaims what he has seen in the Father's presence. This section ends with a fascinating assertion, aimed at the wider group of unbelievers rather than those who had just come to faith—you do what you have heard from your father. An optional reading appears in the margin of most translations: "Therefore do what you have heard from the Father." But the conversation that follows seems to support the rendering in the text. Jesus

had not yet said who their father was, but one thing was already clear: they were not children of God or Abraham as they claimed.

8:39–41. Freedom from error, freedom from sin, and finally in this section John proclaimed that true disciples are liberated from unholy zeal. So the issue of origins continues. The crowds insisted that as Jews they were Abraham’s children and therefore truth was their special contribution to the world. But Jesus told them since Abraham served God and since he (Jesus) was the Son of God, true children of Abraham should accept his message. But instead of accepting, they intended to kill this proclaimer of truth. Why? Because they behaved just like their father.

At this point we wish we could have audio aids for Bible interpretation—some way of hearing how these Jews responded. Perhaps the emphasis falls on the first word, “we are not illegitimate children.” The implication and innuendo seem obvious—“like you are.” Remember verse 19 where they asked him, “Where is your father?” In a small country like Israel, the rumors surrounding the virgin birth may have been known to many people, even in Jerusalem. This stigma probably followed Jesus throughout his earthly ministry. On occasion, perhaps here, it became an issue of public debate.

A person cannot read John’s Gospel and believe in universalism (the idea that God will eventually save everyone) or the universal fatherhood of God (the idea that all people are children of God in the spiritual sense). As Boice declares, “I do not know who first originated the popular phrase ‘the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man,’ but I suspect that it is a product of nineteenth-century liberalism. I know that it is not a proper expression of true Christianity. The phrase sounds good. It suggests that all men are really brothers despite their differences and that all worship the same God regardless of the different names they give to Him. But that is just not true, and both the Word of God and history refute it” (Boice, James M. *The Gospel of John* (5 vols.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977, p. 369).

8:42–43. Jesus was speaking to religious leaders in these verses. In their ignorance they did not understand that true disciples love Jesus. Jesus continued to repeat himself and explain why their relationship to some father other than God had blinded them to the truth. They could not possibly be disciples of the true God. If they were, they would love his Son who was now speaking to them. They had some inherent disability to hear and understand what he was saying.

8:44–47. True disciples love Jesus, and true disciples resist Satan. Since we probably have only a capsule of the overall debate, we should assume that this discussion went on for hours. Jesus boldly proclaimed his relationship to the heavenly Father and they inferred his illegitimacy on earth. He indicated several times that they did not belong to Abraham but to some other father. Now he told them precisely who that was: You belong to your father, the devil.

Notice the connection between verses 43 and 44. In verse 43 Jesus asked, “Why is my language not clear to you?” Now in verse 44 he indicated that when Satan lies, he speaks his native language. Truth is the opposite of lying and the opposite of heresy. The only possible explanation for the inability of the religious leaders to understand Jesus was that they clung to Satan’s lies so tightly that they could not climb out of the darkness and into the light that Jesus offered them.

Jesus’ truth sails over the heads of some people who admit they have no interest in serving God, but they resist the suggestion that they are serving Satan. This text claims that those who reject Christ’s truth and focus on serving themselves are deceived by Satan into believing they are children of God when they are not.

What makes a true disciple? He or she believes the truth of Jesus and obeys what God says. Why could not these skeptics in the audience hear God’s truth? Because they did not belong to God. Believers have had a family transplant in the reverse way transplants are normally done. Rather than having a new family put into them, they have been put into a new family—removed from the family of Satan and placed into the family of God. John 8:47 explains why the Bible makes no sense to some people. Only those who have trusted Christ can grasp the truths of God’s Word, believe them, and obey them.

8:48–51. Now the discussion turned ugly. Jesus’ opponents had already questioned his proof and family connections; now they said what they had been thinking all along: you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed. Few insults could have carried more anger and bitterness in the first century. But Jesus ignored the name calling. He stuck to his basic theme of true discipleship by emphasizing that true disciples keep Jesus’ words. The Lord emphasized truth and explained his relationship to the Father. In verse 51 the opening phrase (I tell you the truth) translates the two words *amen, amen* which appear in 127 verses of the New Testament.

Some interpreters emphasize the ethnic barriers John had already described in chapter 4. But the context deals not so much with religious practice as it does with rejection of Jesus. This may have been an intentional jab at his roots. We do not see the accusation of being a Samaritan anywhere else in the Bible, but demon-possession appears in John 7:20; 8:52 and 10:20 and in the synoptic Gospels as well (Matt. 9:34; 11:18; 12:24ff.; Mark 3:22ff.).

Let us not lose the message of eternal life in the difficult discussions of this chapter. John maintained this theme because he had heard Jesus speak of it so often. The Son does not glorify himself. The Father glorifies him. Those who trust the Son’s word advance the Father’s glory and will never see death.

8:52–53. The question of who would die and when and how and what would happen after death had occupied Jewish theology for centuries. Suddenly Jesus appeared, talking about life after death in almost casual terms and assuring hearers that acceptance of truth meant that true disciples would never die.

In verse 24 he had warned the religious leaders that they would die in their sins if they did not believe his message. He had been speaking about the Father's presence and returning there. But they saw only the earthly interpretation. Abraham died. The prophets died. Yet this strange Galilean promised a life with no death? Obviously, he must consider himself greater than Abraham and the prophets, an unthinkable arrogance which they diagnosed as demon possession. Do not miss the switch in the key question from "Who are you?" in verse 25 to Who do you think you are? in verse 53.

8:54–56. True disciples of Jesus are hated by the world. Jesus had been trying to tell them since the beginning of the discussion that he did not stand alone in witnessing the truth of his message. In fact, it was not his message at all but the message of the Father, the one they claimed as their God. Interpretations of these verses must recognize two different Greek verbs translated by the English word know in verse 55. These religious leaders did not know God by experience (*oidao*), but Jesus knew him by personal relationship (*ginosko*). Jesus came to tell them the truth about his relationship with the Father.

The reference to my day in verse 56 delineated Christ's birth and time on earth. Some interpreters have narrowed it to the crucifixion and/or resurrection, but such a scenario seems unwarranted here. Tenney connects an Old Testament promise to this statement, linking back to Genesis 12:3. "Although this interpretation is not founded on any specific statement of Scripture, it would mean that Abraham's personal experience at the sacrifice of Isaac could have been an object lesson to him of the coming incarnation, death, and resurrection of the promised Seed (see Gen. 22:1–18; Heb. 11:17–19)" (Tenney, Merrill C. *The Gospel of John*. Expositor's Bible Commentary. Vol. 9. Ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981, pp. 98–99).

8:57–59. By this time the rejecting skeptics' patience had been bent to the breaking point. This young man (interesting they should say not yet fifty years old) had seen Abraham? Jesus' response provided the final blow. Once again he picked up a theme from the Old Testament: "God said to Moses, 'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I am has sent me to you" ' " (Exod. 3:14). In this chapter Jesus made himself equal with God, a cornerstone of biblical theology. How did they respond? They picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus slipped away from the temple grounds.

Borchert has a helpful paragraph on Jesus' claim to be one with the Father: "Extending the present into the past does not compute in most of our minds. It is a confusion to the way we think. But God does not fit into the teacups of our minds. More pertinent for our purposes, however, is the fact that Jesus claimed to be 'I AM' over against Abraham. That claim was a reminder of the claims for God in the Old Testament over against creation (cf. Ps. 90:2; Isa. 42:3–9) and of the self-designation for the comforting God of Isaiah (41:4; 43:3, 13). The claim of Jesus, therefore, was clearly recognized from the Jews' perspective to be a blasphemous statement they could not tolerate" (Borchert, p. 309).¹

¹ Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).