

The Gospel of John
Session Sixteen: Jesus and the Religious Leaders
Commentary

John 7:45-53

7:45–46. This chapter ends in an interesting way. John described conversations between the temple guards and the Pharisees. The officers who had witnessed all this and heard Jesus' words were impressed, more by his words than his works. But people who did not agree with the Pharisaic point of view were cursed.

7:47–49. The Pharisees questioned the guards with a series of rhetorical questions extending all the way to the end of the chapter. The word rulers probably refers to religious leaders other than Pharisees, perhaps the Sadducees and other members of the Sanhedrin. In this entire section, John set law against grace and faith as a means of relating to God. Certainly the mob knew the significance of the Old Testament. Morris explains their complaint: "It means that they did not know the Law in the way the Pharisees did. These students discern 613 commandments in the law, and they set themselves the task of earning their salvation by trying to keep them all. Even this was not the whole task, for they added the entire corpus of oral tradition concerning the law (which governed the interpretation of biblical passages). It was small wonder that ordinary pious people, like the crowd of pilgrims, simply gave up the task" (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, pp. 432–33).

The complaint divided the ignorant mob from the in-the-know religious leaders, indicating that only stupidity would lead anyone to believe in Jesus. Certainly no Pharisee would ever do that. But was that really true? Apparently not.

7:50–53. Nicodemus asked whether Jewish law was being followed. But the blind Pharisees had no interest in law or in their colleague Nicodemus. It was a geographical issue. Jesus came from Galilee and no prophet would come from Galilee, so that was the end of the matter.

Let us not attribute more to Nicodemus than the text gives him. He did not defend Jesus nor cite any specific Old Testament text. He called for a more rational environment in which cooler heads could prevail. We see this behavior from another rabbi, Gamaliel, just about two years later (Acts 5:34–39). On the careless claim of the Pharisees about prophets in Galilee, Carson suggests a textual variation: "It is also possible that the original reading is not 'a prophet' but 'the prophet,' i.e., the prophet like Moses (cf. Notes on 6:14; 7:40): some of the earliest and best manuscripts support this reading, though admittedly the bulk of the textual attestation goes the other way" (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 332).¹

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