



The Gospel of John

Session 19: Jesus and Abraham

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

John 8 closes with a bold declaration from Jesus: *“Truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.”* (v. 58). In this short statement, Jesus declared equality with the Father.

“I Am” was not a new name for God. Given to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3, *“I Am”* translated Yahweh, or YHWH, is God’s holiest name, reflecting His sovereignty over all things. When Jesus identified Himself as *“I Am,”* He drew an eternal line in the sand—either He is the Messiah, and we should surrender our lives to Him in worship, or He is a liar to be dismissed. Other options for Jesus—a good teacher, a moral person, a miracle worker, cannot stand up to Jesus’s claim.

TODAY’S SCRIPTURES

John 8:21-59

THE MAIN IDEA

Jesus reframes spiritual identity not by ancestry, but by relationship. In today’s text, Jesus proclaimed that eternal inheritance is not automatic, but is received through faith in Him.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How does Jesus challenge us to have a high view of sin, but an even higher view of grace? Why is this encouraging?

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

John 8:21-29 In these last verses of chapter 8, Jesus spoke in clear terms about His divinity and predicted His death. He told the Pharisees they would look for Him but would not find Him. If they would not seek Jesus with sincerity and faith, they would die in their sins.

John 8:30-47 Ancestry is different from acceptance. The Pharisees wanted to boast in their connection to the Patriarch, Abraham, but failed to see Jesus is the One to whom the Law and Prophets pointed. Jesus declared His disciples would know the truth, and the truth would set them free.

John 8:48-59 Jesus’s bold declarations in these verses set in motion the Pharisees plans to take His life. We cannot hear Jesus’s claims and remain neutral. Because Jesus is Lord, He deserves our worship and devotion.



START HERE

The religious leaders of Jesus's day took great pride in their ancestry. As children of Abraham, they believed they had an advantage over others and were the only people guaranteed a relationship with God. In today's text, Jesus challenged their thinking, connecting eternal inheritance with relationship, not DNA. To make this point, He made two bold declarations: He is the "I Am" and in Him is eternal life.

DISCUSS

If someone asked you to explain who Jesus is in three words, what would you choose, and why?

REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. Presumed Heirs to Eternal Separation: Looking for Jesus Versus Seeking Him

John 8:21-29: Then he said to them again, "I'm going away; you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I'm going, you cannot come."

So the Jews said again, "He won't kill himself, will he, since he says, 'Where I'm going, you cannot come'?"

"You are from below," he told them, "I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. Therefore I told you that you will die in your sins. For if you do not believe that I am he, you will die in your sins."

"Who are you?" they questioned.

"Exactly what I've been telling you from the very beginning," Jesus told them. "I have many things to say and to judge about you, but the one who sent me is true, and what I have heard from him—these things I tell the world."

They did not know he was speaking to them about the Father. So Jesus said to them, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own. But just as the Father taught me, I say these things. The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, because I always do what pleases him."

Unpacking John 8:21-29

In estate law, being named in the family tree is not a guarantee of inheritance. Even biological children can be legally disinherited from the family. History is full of stories of children and grandchildren who felt entitled to large fortunes, but because of their actions or estrangement,



found themselves struck from the list of beneficiaries. Jesus confronted a similar assumption in John 8. The religious leaders believed their lineage secured their spiritual future, but Jesus insisted that heritage without faith leads not to inheritance, but spiritual separation. Spiritual death, like legal disinheritance, is not accidental, but relational.

“Then he said to them again, ‘I’m going away; you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I’m going, you cannot come.’” Seeking (looking for) Jesus is an important step in one’s spiritual journey. We are encouraged repeatedly throughout Scripture to seek God. In Matthew 7:7-8 Jesus declared, *“Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”* How is it, then, that Jesus predicted the Pharisees would look (seek), but they would not find Him? Why did Jesus declare they would die in their sin, if seeking is the path to finding Him?

The answer lies in motivation and faith. Jesus told the Pharisees that after His death, *“you will look for me, and you will die in your sin”* (John 8:21). Looking for Jesus is different from seeking Him from a sincere heart. The Pharisees would look for Jesus to have Him arrested. They would look for Him to be crucified. They would look for evidence that He was not resurrected from the dead. They would, not, however, seek Him with eyes of faith. They would look for facts, not seek a Savior. Because of their stubborn disbelief—even after Jesus’s death and resurrection—they would die in their sins.

The prophet Isaiah wrote,

*“Seek the LORD while he may be found;
call to him while he is near.
Let the wicked one abandon his way
and the sinful one his thoughts;
let him return to the LORD,
so he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will freely forgive.”*
—Isaiah 55:6-7

In this same verse, Jesus predicted His death. *“Where I’m going you cannot come”* (v. 21). The Pharisees, unclear on Jesus’s heavenly origin or His earthly mission, failed to comprehend, questioning if His was contemplating suicide (v. 22). They continued to *“look for”* Jesus in the temple courts and in the synagogues to catch Him breaking the law (something He never did), but they were far from seeking Him with their hearts. For this reason, Jesus declared, *“You are from below,” he told them, “I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. Therefore I told you that you will die in your sins. For if you do not believe that I am he, you will die in your sins”* (vv. 23-24).

Spiritual seeking comes from a spiritual hunger, is initiated by God, and helps us believe Scripture and the testimony of other Christians. By contrast, the Pharisees “looking” was for the



purpose of destroying Jesus and refuting the testimony of other witnesses. Seeking leads to belief and faith; mere looking leads to spiritual death.

In the 1980s, Lee Strobel, an apologist and author, set out to “look for” Jesus to publish the ultimate expose—disproving Christ once and for all. Instead, his search brought him to the ultimate truth—Jesus is Lord. Lee wrote, *“I didn’t want to believe it. I didn’t want to accept Jesus as my Lord. I was thoroughly convinced that Christianity was a sham. But as I investigated the evidence, I reached the verdict that Jesus is the unique Son of God.”* His looking became seeking which turned into faith. Strobel goes on, *“In light of the avalanche of evidence that pointed so powerfully toward the truth of Christianity, I became a Christian.”*

In verses 25-26, the Pharisees again questioned who Jesus is, and He reminded them what He had said to them from the beginning, recounting His origin from the Father. Jesus would not perform some kind of artificial test to prove His divinity. The Pharisees, like others, must come to Him by faith. The Pharisees were close to Jesus, yet far from salvation. They stubbornly refused to come to Him. As R.C. Sproul said, *“It is possible to be close to the kingdom of God and yet far from God Himself.”*

Jesus concluded this section by foretelling His death: *“When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own. But just as the Father taught me, I say these things. The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, because I always do what pleases him”* (vv. 28-29). Jesus knew their hearts. He understood their looking was for His destruction, not their salvation, and He knew they would die in their sins (v. 24).

DISCUSS

- What does it mean for a person to die in their sins (v. 24)?
- How might someone rely on spiritual proximity rather than on personal faith? Why is this so dangerous?
- How would you explain the difference between spiritual heritage and saving faith to someone new to or considering Christianity?

2. Truth to Freedom: The Marks of a Legitimate Heir

John 8:30-47: As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, *“If you continue in my word, you really are my disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*

“We are descendants of Abraham,” they answered him, “and we have never been enslaved to anyone. How can you say, ‘You will become free’?”



Jesus responded, “Truly I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. A slave does not remain in the household forever, but a son does remain forever. So if the Son sets you free, you really will be free. I know you are descendants of Abraham, but you are trying to kill me because my word has no place among you. I speak what I have seen in the presence of the Father; so then, you do what you have heard from your father.”

“Our father is Abraham,” they replied.

“If you were Abraham’s children,” Jesus told them, “you would do what Abraham did. But now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. You’re doing what your father does.”

“We weren’t born of sexual immorality,” they said. “We have one Father—God.”

Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, because I came from God and I am here. For I didn’t come on my own, but he sent me. Why don’t you understand what I say? Because you cannot listen to my word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he speaks from his own nature, because he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Who among you can convict me of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don’t you believe me? The one who is from God listens to God’s words. This is why you don’t listen because you are not from God.”

Unpacking John 8:30-47

In estate disputes, courts often look for evidence of connection and belonging—legal adoption papers, letters of intent to include someone in an inheritance, or a long-term relationship with the deceased. Often, claiming a name is not enough; proof of relationship is what matters.

Jesus made a similar argument: True children of Abraham don’t just claim His name. Rather, they reflect his faith. Genesis 15:6 says, *“Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”* Abraham’s inheritance was not only based on his ancestry or good deeds. He was considered righteous on the basis of His faith in God. Jesus continued to point out that faith, not pedigree, is the path to the kingdom of God.

As Jesus spoke these words to the unbelieving Pharisees, others put their faith in Him. When the gospel is preached, seeds are planted for the kingdom and growth occurs. While Jesus spoke the previous verses to the religious leaders, His words did not return void, but rather accomplished salvation for those who believed (Isaiah 55:11).

To those who put their faith in Christ He replied, *“If you continue in my word, you really are my disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* Jesus was not implying that faith in Christ is not sufficient for salvation. Ephesians 2:8-9 says we are saved by grace through faith. Rather, Jesus stated that the validity of their faith claim would be evidenced by an ongoing



commitment to continue in His teachings. Making a claim to faith once with no follow-up or evidence does not reflect a regenerated heart. A sincere follower of Jesus will be known by their fruit (Matthew 7:16-20) and will demonstrate works not for salvation, but as confirmation of it (James 2:18).

The Harvard graduating class of 1881 chose to inscribe the following words on the university gate built to honor their achievement: *"Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."* This verse, they believed, reflected the University's original moto: *Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae*—Truth for Christ and the church. These students recognized what Jesus declared: A search for spiritual truth leads to spiritual freedom. God's truth has liberating power, turning people away from the bondage of sin, and toward Christ who sets people free.

For the religious leaders, their ancestry, *"We are descendants of Abraham,"* (v. 33) was more important than the truth Jesus spoke. For them, coming into God's presence was a privilege of paternity, not faith. Further, they could not see any need for a release from bondage. *"We have never been enslaved to anyone. How can you say, 'You will become free'?"* The irony, of course, is the Jews had endured slavery throughout their history. They were slaves in Egypt for 400 years and had experienced exile not once, but twice. Even in Jesus's day they lived under Roman occupation. They could not see their need for deliverance, because they could not yet see their imprisonment.

Jesus responded, *"Truly I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. A slave does not remain in the household forever, but a son does remain forever. So if the Son sets you free, you really will be free"* (vv. 34-36).

All sin is rebellion against God (1 John 3:4). Sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2), makes us participants and recipients of destruction (Galatians 6:7-8), and leads to spiritual death (Romans 6:23). No one—not the religious elite nor those of the lineage of Abraham—is free of sin and its consequences (Romans 3:23). We are all slaves to sin and in need of a Savior.

"Our father is Abraham," they replied (v. 39). Jesus rebuked their claim: *"If you were Abraham's children," Jesus told them, "you would do what Abraham did. But now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. You're doing what your father does"* (vv. 40-41). If the Pharisees operated under the faith and righteousness of Abraham, they would have received Jesus gladly, but they operated under the instructions of a different authority.

"We weren't born of sexual immorality," they said. *"We have one Father—God"* (v. 41). Here, the Pharisees resorted to a sneering attack. Without the ability to make a reasonable theological answer to Jesus's claim, they took a jab at Jesus's parentage. While we don't have record of Jesus speaking about His virgin birth, His unusual birth story and questions surrounding His parentage likely was known and discussed throughout the region.



Unphased, Jesus immediately turned the conversation back to the Pharisees' spiritual condition. He would not allow their deflection to keep Him from sharing truth. Their lack of faith and hostility to Jesus did not point to kinship with the Father, but allegiance to Satan.

While these words may sound harsh, they point to a very real truth—we all belong to someone. We either belong to Christ or the devil. There is no middle ground or spiritual autonomy. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:1-2, *“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins in which you previously walked according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient.”* It is important to remember that apart from our personal relationship with Christ, our disobedience and destiny would be no better than the Pharisees. However, Paul went on to say, *“But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace!”* (Ephesians 2:5). The truth that we are alive in Christ through grace should cause us to live humbly before God and to share the truth of Christ with others.

Jesus declared Satan as a murderer and a liar. We cannot trust anything that the enemy says, because there is no truth in him. When he entices us to sin, it's no surprise that the result never satisfies. Everything the devil says is a lie which leads to death—only Jesus leads to freedom and salvation.

DISCUSS

- According to Jesus, what distinguishes a slave from a son? (vv. 34-36)
- How do people confuse freedom with autonomy rather than obedience? How to obedience to Christ make us free?
- What does it mean to “continue in” Jesus' words? (v. 31) How might familiarity with Jesus and the Scriptures make it easy for us to stop pursuing Him with intention?

3. The Eternal Estate of the Son: An Inheritance Death Can't Touch

John 8:48-59: *The Jews responded to him, “Aren't we right in saying that you're a Samaritan and have a demon?”*

“I do not have a demon,” Jesus answered. “On the contrary, I honor my Father and you dishonor me. I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it and judges. Truly I tell you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”

Then the Jews said, “Now we know you have a demon. Abraham died and so did the prophets. You say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ Are you greater than our father Abraham who died? And the prophets died. Who do you claim to be?”



“If I glorify myself,” Jesus answered, “my glory is nothing. My Father—about whom you say, ‘He is our God’—he is the one who glorifies me. You do not know him, but I know him. If I were to say I don’t know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him, and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad.”

The Jews replied, “You aren’t fifty years old yet, and you’ve seen Abraham?”

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.”

So they picked up stones to throw at him. But Jesus was hidden and went out of the temple.

Unpacking John 8:48-59

Some of the most famous wills in history have included bizarre provisions: millions left to pets, fortunes delayed for generations, or on condition of marriage or completion of a particular education. Other inheritances were revoked completely at the last minute. But earthly fortunes all share the same destiny. Eventually, they all come to an end.

Jesus contrasted temporary inheritance with an eternal legacy. Jesus’s authority came not from Abraham’s legacy, but from His relationship with the Father, and ultimately His own ability to conquer sin and death.

In verse 48, the Jews further provoked Jesus with what might seem like an unlikely put-down: *“Aren’t we right in saying that you’re a Samaritan and have a demon?”* The Samaritans, as you might recall, were Jews who did not leave in the first Babylonian exile and assimilated into a foreign culture while retaining certain aspects of Judaism. They believed in the Pentateuch, the first five books of Old Testament, but rejected the rest. They also allowed for special provisions, like worshiping God outside of Jerusalem (This came up with the Samaritan woman in John 4:1-42). To accuse Jesus of being a “Samaritan” was a cultural slur and an accusation of not holding to theological integrity. Calling Him demon-possessed was the equivalent of calling Him crazy.

While the Pharisees sought to discredit Jesus, Jesus’s life and ministry honored the Father. *“I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it and judges”* (v. 50). This was displayed at Jesus’s baptism (Matthew 3:16-17), the transfiguration (Matthew 17:5), and in Jesus’s prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (John 17:4-5). Each member of the Godhead glorifies the others. Jesus’s words to the Pharisees spoke to His unique, personal relationship with the Father.

Based on His relationship with the Father, Jesus made the first of two bold, messianic claims: *“Truly I tell you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death”* (v. 51). Jesus proclaimed that He would give eternal life to those who abide in His Word. Immediate outrage filled the religious leaders who accused Jesus of demon possession. If Abraham and the prophets died, how could Jesus claim eternal life? In their anger, they asked Jesus directly, *“Who do you claim to be?”*



In our modern reading, it might seem Jesus avoided answering the question outright. Rather than say, as we might expect, *“I am the Messiah,”* Jesus circled back to His argument that He did not glorify Himself, but the Father, and the Father glorified the Son. Jesus would leave the final verification of His divinity to God. Jesus argued that the Pharisees didn’t know God like He did, and then declared, *“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad”* (v. 56). The distinction was clear—their father was a prophet who died, and Jesus’s Father is the eternal God. Jesus not only set Himself apart from the religious leaders, He also reenforced His claim of eternity. Jesus also said Abraham saw Him and rejoiced in His arrival.

The Pharisees couldn’t understand how Jesus could have known Abraham. After all, He was a young man, and Abraham had died many years before. In His explanation, however, Jesus would make His second Messianic claim: *“Truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am”* (v. 58). A first-century Jewish person would have no question as to Jesus’s claims. *“I am”* is the most holy name of God, given to Moses in the burning bush in Exodus 3. It is the name, Yahweh, which translates roughly to *“I Am who I Am.”* God is complete, self-existing, self-sustaining, and eternal. Given this context, Jesus’s answer was not obtuse—He made a bold declaration that He is the eternal, life-giving, life-sustaining Lord over all.

As we might expect, this declaration did not cause the Pharisees to fall at Jesus’s feet in worship, worthy as He is. Instead, *“they picked up stones to throw at him. But Jesus was hidden and went out of the temple”* (v. 59).

Jesus is not merely a good teacher, a prophet, or a miracle worker. He does not exist to perform for anyone. He is God. The Pharisees, after encountering the bold claims of Jesus, rebuked Him and sought His death. Still today, we cannot read the words of Jesus and remain neutral to His messianic claims. His declaration demands a decision.

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote, *“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to . . . Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange, or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.”*

Each person must choose what they will do with the person of Jesus. When we come to faith in Christ, we embrace the two truths that Jesus proclaimed in this passage: He is God, and in Him is eternal life. One cannot exist without the other. Like Abraham, we rejoice in Jesus’s coming that made a way for our eternity with Him.



DISCUSS

- *Why was Jesus's statement in verse 58 considered blasphemy?*
- *How would you explain Jesus's claims in John 8 to an unbeliever? Why is identifying Jesus only as a prophet or good teacher not an option?*
- *How does belief in eternal life with Christ shape how someone faces suffering or loss? How does having an eternal perspective change our present priorities?*

DEEPER FOCUS

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

DISCUSS

- *Which "inheritance assumption" challenges you most from this passage?*
- *How does Jesus redefine what it means to belong to God's family?*
- *What evidence in your life reflects your spiritual parentage?*

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

- *Where might you be relying on spiritual proximity instead of personal faith? What needs to change?*

APPLY

How does the promise of an eternal inheritance affect how you live today?

REFERENCES

R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Tyndale House, 1992).

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