

The Witnesses

John 5:16,31-47

We are pursuing an understanding of the teaching of Jesus. To do so, we have to move among the 4 gospels. So we are moving from Matthew to John. Notice that Jesus' teaching feels different in John than it did in Matthew. These gospels were written with different purposes and this is very evident in the character of Jesus' teaching. Matthew is very interested in theology and in applying the teaching to life as we live it from day to day. John is an apologetic book. It seeks to demonstrate that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, to assure believers of the reliability of the promise of eternal life and to encourage the children of God to enjoy both now and forever their relationship with God through Jesus.

The first three gospels tell the story of Jesus' Galilean ministry. This is where Jesus spent the majority of His time and so this northern region was witness to most of His miracles and teachings. John includes the stories of Jesus' ministry trips to Jerusalem and consequently the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities is sharper and even more strained than in the other Gospels. Jesus' genuine identity is established against the contradicting attacks of His enemies.

There is also a pattern in John that links the teaching of Jesus to specific circumstantial events. Examples include: the visit of Nicodemus and the teaching of how to be born again, the Samaritan woman and living water, the healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda and the four-fold witness, the feeding of the 5,000 and the bread of life, unrest among Jesus' brothers and the people and Jesus' declaration of His true personhood, the woman taken in adultery and the truth that sets you free, the healing of the blind man and the Good Shepherd, the raising of Lazarus and the resurrection.

In our story, Jesus encountered the man who had been ill for 38 years and who was at the Pool of Bethesda waiting for the moving of the water so that he could be healed. Healings had apparently

taken place there and the man continued to wait there even though on other occasions he had not been able to reach the

water first. Jesus asked him, "Do you want to be made well?" He answered by giving an explanation for why he had not yet been healed. (He had no one to help him get to the water first.) Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." He was immediately made well and he took up his bed and walked. Right away, he got in trouble because he was carrying his bed through town and it was the Sabbath Day. Once they figured out that Jesus had healed him, they went after Jesus for healing on the Sabbath Day.

Jesus was unashamed. The religious leaders were righteously indignant. This was a gap that would not be bridged. The observer has to choose between them. Clearly, there were problems with the position of the religious leaders. They would not admit that a miracle had been done to the glory of God. Jesus confronted them with this claim. They could not get past the Sabbath issue. There is no doubt that Jesus healed every day of the week but there is also no doubt that He never hesitated to heal on the Sabbath. For Jesus, it was a non- issue even though He knew the trouble it would bring to Him. The trouble was the context of His teaching. It was a context that inevitably followed actions that created the controversy. But, for Jesus, avoiding controversy was not His priority. He gave Himself to works of compassion and to the speaking of the truth.

To explain His actions, He identified Himself with the Father. "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." Jesus had done what only God can do. Jesus actions could then not be separated from that of the Father. This is rooted in the relationship between the Father and the Son. For God to share His prerogative in respect to life and death, heaven and hell, demands the deepest of trust, the closest of relationship. This is all in the act of the healing of the man at the pool. There were others there but Jesus healed the one man. He was uniquely suited to demonstrate the power of God and compassion evident in Jesus. His circumstance spoke eloquently of the power of God as the only legitimate explanation for his healing. His hopeful spirit was a witness to his readiness to

hear and respond to Jesus' healing command. Jesus acted in God's stead as God would have acted. The protest against the healing was a protest against God. This is a tragic irony, when the religious and righteous act in opposition to God's active workings.

At the heart of the controversy then was the legitimacy of Jesus' relationship with God and the nature of His true identity. Jesus appealed to logic and to what could be called deep spiritual analysis. First, Jesus admitted that if He were the one bearing witness to His standing with God then this could not be trusted but this was not the case. The first witness Jesus called was John the Baptist. He had been celebrated for a time, "He was a shining and burning lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light." So these religious leaders had accepted John until he had given witness that Jesus was the Christ. Secondly, Jesus drew attention to the fact that His works gave witness as to who He was. This was the frank admission of Nicodemus and it was the only fair conclusion that was possible. It required an openness to be taught by the words of Jesus that followed His works. The people liked His works but they often did not like His message. His message was not what they expected. But the works should have given weight to the words. God is who He is. He is not who I imagine Him to be. Thirdly, Jesus sighted the witness of the Father. Publicly, the Father had spoken at Jesus' Baptism. This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." There were many present and they were witnesses to what had taken place. It was part of the public record. It was evidence that had to be given great weight. No one who was there could dispute the fact. In the rejection of the Father's witness there was a rejection of the Father Himself. Finally, there were the scriptures themselves. They attempted to use the Scriptures to establish their own program but it was the Scriptures themselves that testified of Jesus and that formed the final proof that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God. Facing the truth, with the clarity of the obvious, they rejected it and they rejected Jesus.

This was the great exposure of the hypocrisy of the opposition to Jesus. They claimed to be spiritual. They claimed to represent God. They really had nothing to do with Him. They had a system of observance that entirely left God out of their lives. The proof was in

their rejection of Christ. That rejection established that there was nothing of the true God in their lives. The evil of their rejection of Christ made everything in them evil.