

John: sermon #9

Conflict and Contrasts (John 8)

Introduction

In John chapter 8, Jesus' ongoing conflict with the Jewish religious leaders escalates to a new level. They set a trap for Jesus, hoping to get enough evidence to arrest him and get him out of the way. However, the plot fails. But the ensuing discussion reveals five important contrasts between the grace and truth of Jesus and the wickedness and blindness of humankind. Here the identity of Jesus is clarified and humankind's need for the one and only Savior is powerfully emphasized.

1. Grace and Law (7:53-8:11)

7:53 Then each went to his own home. 8:1 But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4 and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Comment: The story of the woman caught in adultery (7:53–8:11) is not found in some ancient manuscripts or in others is found in a different

location. However many scholars agree that the passage is inspired Scripture that fits here—indeed the entire chapter grows naturally out of this striking event.

The Feast of Tabernacles had ended, but Jesus stayed on in Jerusalem to minister to the festival pilgrims. During the feast, word had quickly spread that Jesus was not only attending but openly teaching in the temple (see Luke 21:37). He taught in the court of the women at the place where the treasury was situated (John 8:20). The scribes and Pharisees knew where he would be and hatched their plot.

It is unlikely that they caught the couple in the very act of adultery; so we wonder if the man (who never was indicted) was part of the scheme. The Law required that *both* guilty parties be stoned (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22)—not just the woman. It's suspicious that the man went free. The scribes and Pharisees handled the matter in a brutal fashion, even in the way they interrupted the Lord's teaching and pushed the woman into the midst of the crowd.

The Jewish leaders, of course, were trying to pin Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. If he said, "Yes, the woman must be stoned!" then what would happen to his reputation as the "friend of publicans and sinners"? The common people would no doubt have abandoned him and would never have accepted His gracious message of forgiveness. But, if he said, "No, the woman should not be stoned!" then he was openly breaking the Law and subject to arrest. On more than one occasion, the religious leaders had tried to pit Jesus against Moses, and now they seemed to have the perfect challenge (see John 5:39–47; 6:32ff; 7:40ff).

Instead of passing judgment on the woman, Jesus passed judgment on the judges. No doubt he was indignant at the way they treated the woman. He was also concerned that such hypocrites should condemn another person and not judge themselves. We do not know what he wrote on the dirt floor of the temple court. Was he simply reminding them that the Ten Commandments had been originally written "by the finger of God" (Ex. 31:18), and that he is that God? Or was he perhaps reminding them of the warning in Jeremiah 17:13?

It was required by Jewish Law that the accusers cast the first stones (Deut. 17:7). Jesus was not asking that sinless men judge the woman, for he was the only sinless person present. He was referring to *the particular sin of the*

woman, a sin that can be committed in the heart as well as with the body (Matt. 5:27–30). Convicted by their own consciences, the accusers quietly left the scene, and Jesus was left alone with the woman. All they had to offer her was the Law and its condemnation. Jesus gave her grace—forgiving her and setting her free to sin no more (5:14). The experience of gracious forgiveness would motivate the woman to live a new life for God's glory.

2. Light and Darkness (8:12–20)

12 When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." 13 The Pharisees challenged him, "Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid."

14 Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. 15 You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. 16 But if I do judge, my decisions are right, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me. 17 In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two men is valid. 18 I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me."

19 Then they asked him, "Where is your father?" "You do not know me or my Father," Jesus replied. "If you knew me, you would know my Father also." 20 He spoke these words while teaching in the temple area near the place where the offerings were put. Yet no one seized him, because his time had not yet come.

Here is the second great I AM statement in John. Perhaps he was recalling the great light spectacle in the temple courts created at night by the lighting of many huge candelabra placed there during the Feast of Tabernacles to illuminate the courts and to remind the people of the pillar of fire by night which accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness. Or perhaps Jesus was referring to the rising sun (8:2). In any case, he was clearly claiming to be God—the Great I AM; the world's light and life. And wherever that light shines, man's wickedness is revealed (Eph. 5:8–14). To follow Jesus means

to believe in him, to trust him; and the results are *life* and *light* for the believer. The unsaved are walking in darkness because they love darkness (3:17ff). One of the major messages in this Gospel is that the spiritual light is now shining, but people cannot comprehend it—and they try to put it out (1:4, 5).

Not all of the Jewish leaders had left the group, and others had no doubt come along after the woman left. As usual, they debated with Jesus. This time, they accused him of bearing witness to himself by claiming to be the Light of the world; and Jewish courts would not permit a person to bear witness to himself. But light *has to* bear witness to itself! The only people who cannot see the light are *blind* people!

Perhaps the Pharisees were quoting our Lord's own words (see 5:31ff); but he quickly refuted *their* argument. One of the key words in this section is *testify*; it is used seven times. Jesus made it clear that their testimony was not dependable because their judgment was faulty. They judged on the basis of externals, mere human judgment, but He judged on the basis of spiritual knowledge. The way they judged the woman taken in adultery proved that they neither understood their Law nor their own sinful hearts.

Since they wanted to use the Law to condemn the woman and trap the Savior, Jesus also used the Law to answer them. He quoted a principle found in Deuteronomy 17:6 and 19:15, as well as Numbers 35:30, that the testimony of two men was required to validate a judgment. Jesus had those two testimonies: *He* gave testimony and so did *His Father*.

How tragic that these experts in the Law did not even know their own Messiah as he stood before them! They claimed to know the Law of God, but they did not know the God of the Law. They did not have his Word abiding in their hearts (5:38), nor did they experience his love (5:42). They did not know the Father, and therefore did not know the Son.

Jesus never really answered their question, "Where is your Father?" The word *father* is used twenty-one times in this chapter, so Jesus did not avoid the issue but faced it honestly. He knew that their "father" was not God—but the devil.

Their further attempts to arrest Jesus were again thwarted by the Father, for it was not yet God's time when Jesus should give his life.

3. Life and Death (8:21–30)

²¹ Once more Jesus said to them, "I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come." ²² This made the Jews ask, "Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, 'Where I go, you cannot come'?" ²³ But he continued, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. ²⁴ I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins."

²⁵ "Who are you?" they asked. "Just what I have been claiming all along," Jesus replied. ²⁶ "I have much to say in judgment of you. But he who sent me is reliable, and what I have heard from him I tell the world."

²⁷ They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father. ²⁸ So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. ²⁹ The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him." ³⁰ Even as he spoke, many put their faith in him.

Jesus had already mentioned his leaving them (John 7:34), but the Jews had misunderstood what he said. Once again, he warned them: he would leave them, they would not be able to follow him, and they would die in their sins! They were wasting their God-given opportunity by arguing with him instead of trusting in him; and one day soon, their opportunity would be over.

Once again, the people misunderstood his teaching. They thought he was planning to kill himself. Suicide was an abhorrent thing to a Jew, for the Jews were taught to honor all life. If Jesus committed suicide, then he would go to a place of judgment; and this, they reasoned, was why they could not follow him.

Actually, just the opposite was true: it was *they* who were going to the place of judgment. Jesus was returning to his Father in heaven, and nobody can go there with him who has not trusted the Savior. The reason Jesus and the Jewish leaders were going to different destinations was because they had

different *origins*: Jesus came from heaven, but they belonged to the earth. Jesus was *in* the world, but he did not belong to the world (see 17:14–16).

The true believer has his citizenship in heaven (Luke 10:20; Phil. 3:20, 21). His affection and attention are fixed heavenward. But the unsaved belong to this world; in fact, Jesus called them “the children of this world” (Luke 16:8). Since they have not trusted Christ and therefore have their sins forgiven, their destiny is to die in their sins. The Christian dies “in the Lord” because he lives “in the Lord” (Rev. 14:13); but the unbeliever dies in his sins because he lives in his sins.

It seems incredible that these religious “experts” should ask, “Who are you?” He had given them every evidence that he is the Son of God, yet they had deliberately rejected the evidence. Our Lord’s reply may be expressed, “I am exactly what I said!” In other words, “Why should I teach you *new* things, or give you *new* proof, when you have not honestly considered the witness I have already given?”

Jesus boldly made several claims to deity. He said he would judge, and judgment (to the Jews) belonged only to God. He claimed to be sent by God, and he claimed to have heard from God the things that he taught. How did the religious leaders respond to these clear affirmations of deity? They did not understand! God reveals his truth to the “babes” and not to the “wise and prudent” (Luke 10:21).

Now Jesus spoke about his own death, when he would be “lifted up” on the cross (3:14; 12:32). The word translated “lifted up” has a dual meaning: “lifted up in crucifixion,” and “lifted up in exaltation and glorification.” Jesus often combined the two, for he saw his crucifixion in terms of glory and not just suffering (12:23; 13:30, 31; 17:1).

Jesus made two more stupendous claims: not only was he sent by the Father, but the Father was with him because he always did what pleased the Father (8:29). No doubt, his enemies reacted violently to these words: but some of the listeners put their faith in him (8:30).

Salvation is a matter of life or death. People who live in their sins and reject their Savior die in their sins. There is no alternative. We either receive salvation by grace or experience condemnation apart from the receipt of that grace. We either walk in the light and have eternal life, or walk in the darkness and experience eternal death.

4. Freedom and Bondage (8:31–47)

31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." 33 They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

34 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. 37 I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word. 38 I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father."

39 "Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did. 40 As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. 41 You are doing the things your own father does." "We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself."

42 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. 43 Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. 44 You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. 45 Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! 46 Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? 47 He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."

Jesus admonishes the Jews who believed in him (verse 30) that the mark of true discipleship would be to adhere to his teaching—to direct their lives by it. To do so is freedom. To not do so is bondage. And we are reminded that in the Gospel of John, ‘truth’ is embodied in Jesus—he is the truth. And so Christ-followers not only believe what is true (what Jesus says), they are united with him; the One who is the truth. And in that union—in sharing his love and life, they are set free from the bondage of sin.

In verse 33 ‘they’ answer Jesus. But who are ‘they’? Not likely the new believers—more likely ‘they’ are the same unbelieving Jewish leaders who had opposed Jesus throughout this conversation (8:13, 19, 22, 25). As before, they did not understand his message. Jesus was speaking about spiritual freedom, freedom from sin, but they were thinking about political freedom.

Their claim that Abraham’s descendants had never been in bondage was certainly a false one that was refuted by the very record in the Old Testament Scriptures. The Jews had been enslaved by seven mighty nations, as recorded in the Book of Judges. The ten Northern tribes had been carried away captive by Assyria, and the Southern tribes had gone into seventy years of captivity in Babylon. And at that very hour, the Jews were under the iron heel of Rome.

Jesus explained that the difference between spiritual freedom and bondage is a matter of whether one is a son or a slave. The slave may live in the house, but he is not a part of the family; and he cannot be guaranteed a future. “Whosoever keeps on practicing sin [literal translation] is a slave to sin.” These religious leaders would not only *die* in their sins (8:21, 24), but they were right then *living* in bondage to sin. How can slaves of sin be set free? Only by the Son, through his word, which is truth. And “the truth will set you free” (8:32). But they would not “make room” for Jesus and his word in their hearts.

In the rest of this section, you see the debate centering around the word *father*. Jesus identified himself with the Father in heaven, but he identified them with the father from hell, Satan. Of course, the Jews claimed Abraham as their father (Luke 3:8ff), but Jesus made a careful distinction between “Abraham’s seed” (physical descendants) and “Abraham’s children” (spiritual descendants because of personal faith; Gal. 3:6–14). These Jewish leaders, who claimed to belong to Abraham, were very unlike Abraham. For one thing, they wanted to kill Jesus; Abraham was the

“friend of God” and fellowshiped with him in love (Isa. 41:8). Abraham listened to God’s truth and obeyed it, but these religious leaders rejected the truth.

Nature is determined by birth, and birth is determined by paternity. If God is your Father, then you share God’s nature (2 Peter 1:1–4); but if Satan is your father, then you share his evil nature. What were the characteristics of these religious leaders who belonged to the devil? For one thing, they rejected the truth (8:40) and tried to kill Jesus because he spoke the truth. They did not love God (8:42) nor could they understand what Jesus taught (8:43, 47). Satan’s children may be well versed in their religious traditions, but they have no understanding of the Word of God (Jesus Christ).

Satan is a liar and a murderer. He lied to our first parents (“has God really said?”) and engineered their deaths. Cain was a child of the devil (1 John 3:12), for he was both a liar and a murderer. He killed his brother Abel and then lied about it (Gen. 4). Is it any wonder that these religious leaders lied about Jesus, hired false witnesses, and then had him killed?

The worst bondage is the kind that the prisoner himself does not recognize. He thinks he is free, yet he is really a slave. The Pharisees and other religious leaders thought that they were free, but they were actually enslaved in terrible spiritual bondage to sin and Satan. They would not face the truth, and yet it was the truth alone that could set them free.

5. Honor and Dishonor (8:48–59)

48 The Jews answered him, "Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?" 49 "I am not possessed by a demon," said Jesus, "but I honor my Father and you dishonor me. 50 I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. 51 I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."

52 At this the Jews exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he will never taste death. 53 Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?"

54 Jesus replied, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. 55 Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word. 56 Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

57 "You are not yet fifty years old," the Jews said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!" 58 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" 59 At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

The leaders could not refute Jesus' statements, so they attacked his person. Some students think that the leaders' statement in 8:41—"We are not illegitimate children"—was a slur on Jesus' own birth and character. After all, Mary was pregnant before she and Joseph were married. But the personal attacks in 8:48 are quite obvious. For a Jew to be called a Samaritan was a great insult, and to be called demon-possessed added further insult. Jesus did not even dignify the racial slur with an answer. They were dishonoring him, but he was honoring the Father. He had already made it clear that it was impossible to honor the Father without honoring the Son (5:23). They were seeking their own glory (5:41–44), but he was seeking the glory that belongs to God alone.

Jesus had warned them that they would die in their sins because of their unbelief, and now he invited them to trust his word and "never see death" (8:51). He had said this before in his synagogue sermon (6:39, 40, 44, 54). Once again, the leaders lacked the spiritual insight to understand. Abraham was dead, yet he was a godly man; and the faithful prophets were also dead. This kind of talk only convinced them the more that he had a demon (7:20).

By claiming to be the Lord of death, Jesus was claiming to be God (5:21–29). This was not an honor he made for himself; the Father gave it to him. In fact, Abraham (whom they claimed as their father) saw Jesus' day and rejoiced. Instead of rejoicing, they were revolting and trying to kill him.

But how was it that Abraham "saw" our Lord's day, that is, his life and ministry on earth? The same way he saw the future city: by faith (Heb. 11:10, 13–16). God did not give Abraham some special vision, but did give him spiritual perception. Certainly Abraham saw the birth of the Messiah in

the miraculous birth of his own son, Isaac. He certainly saw Calvary when he offered Isaac to God (Gen. 22). In the priestly ministry of Melchizedek (Gen. 14:17–24), Abraham could see the heavenly priesthood of the Lord. In the marriage of Isaac, Abraham could see a picture of the marriage of the Lamb (Gen. 24).

Jesus' statement in John 8:58 can be translated, "Before Abraham came into being, I AM." Again, this was another affirmation of his divine sonship; and the Jewish leaders received it as such. He had once again made himself equal with God (5:18), and this was the sin of blasphemy, worthy of death (Lev. 24:16). But Jesus was divinely protected and simply walked away. His hour had not yet come. We cannot help but admire his courage as he boldly presented the truth and invited blind religious men to trust him and be set free.

Conclusion

The most difficult people to win to the Savior are religious types who do not see their need for the Savior because they are trusting in religious works and tradition to save them. But their trust is misplaced. They are deceived—living a "living death" in bondage to un-forgiven sin. In spite of their religious deeds, they dishonor the Father and the Son. Jesus calls them 'children of the devil' rather than children of God.

Are you a child of God? You are indeed if you place your trust fully and only in Jesus to save you (John 1:12, 13). If you have indeed accepted Jesus as Savior, then God is indeed your Father and heaven is indeed your home. In that place (that relationship) of peace and security, let us pray for and reach out to a world (including the religious types) who do not know Jesus. He is always reaching out to them.

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**GROWING in our RELATIONSHIP
with the TRIUNE GOD**

Relate ... Ask (or compare) ... Pray

John 8:10, 11 "Caught in the Very Act"

Compare this with Romans 8:1.

John 8:12 "I Am the Light of the World"

Compare with John 1:1-9.

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John 8:14, 15 "The Testimony of Two"

Why all the hostility?

John 8:19 "Where Is Your Father?"

Do you ever ask questions to avoid the truth?

John 8:28, 29 "Who Are You?"

In what ways are you free?

John 8:34-36 "Free Indeed"

Do you feel free?

John 8:43, 44 "The Father of Lies"

How is Abraham your father?

John 8:46, 47 "Why Do You Not Believe Me?"

What grounds did the Jews have for their unbelief?

John 8:54, 55 "My Father Who Glorifies"

What don't you understand about Jesus?

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