

John sermon #8

Responses to Jesus' invitation (John 7)

Introduction

John 7:1 After this, Jesus went around in Galilee, purposely staying away from Judea because the Jews there were waiting to take his life.

² But when the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was near, ³ Jesus' brothers said to him, "You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do.

John's account of Jesus' ministry now shifts from Spring to the Fall of the last year of his earthly ministry. Jesus has only about six months before the cross. It's the time of the Feast of Tabernacles—the Jewish festival celebrating God's gracious provision during Israel's sojourn in the wilderness. To remind them of that time, they lived in booths (temporary dwellings, see Lev. 23:33–44). It was a festive time. The temple courts were illumined by large candlesticks to remind the people of the guiding pillar of fire; and each day priests would carry water from the Pool of Siloam and pour it out from a golden vessel, reminding them of God's miraculous provision of water.

Though a festive time for most Jews, this particular Tabernacles season was a particularly trying time for Jesus, for it marked the beginning of open and militant opposition against him. Ever since he healed the paralytic on the Sabbath, Jesus was targeted by the Jewish religious leaders who wanted to kill Him (7:1, 19–20, 25, 30, 32, 44; 8:37, 40). He had returned to Galilee where he would be safer, but now his half-brothers urged him to return to Jerusalem. The feast seemed to them the appropriate time for Jesus to gain a following.

The ensuing story in John 7 has three scenes: before the feast, in the midst of the feast, and on the last day of the feast. The responses during each scene may be characterized by three words: disbelief, debate, and division.

Scene 1: Disbelief before the feast (7:3–10)

3 Jesus' brothers said to him, "You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. 4 No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world." 5 For even his own brothers did not believe in him. 6 Therefore Jesus told them, "The right time for me has not yet come; for you any time is right. 7 The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that what it does is evil. 8 You go to the Feast. I am not yet going up to this Feast, because for me the right time has not yet come." 9 Having said this, he stayed in Galilee. 10 However, after his brothers had left for the Feast, he went also, not publicly, but in secret.

It seems incredible that these brothers who grew up with Jesus did not understand who he was and remained unbelievers. It's a reminder of the blindness of the human heart. And so here they go to a religious feast, while rejecting the very Messiah these feasts of Israel foreshadowed. Publicans and sinners rejoiced in Jesus' message. Jewish religious leaders and Jesus' own brothers mocked him!

His brothers exhibited the world's point of view: if you want a following, do something spectacular. Jerusalem would be crowded with pilgrims and this would give Jesus the ideal "platform" to present himself and win disciples. No doubt the brothers knew that the multitude of disciples had deserted Jesus the previous spring (6:66). This was his opportunity to recoup his losses. Satan had offered a similar suggestion three years earlier (Matt. 4:1ff).

Jesus had already turned down the crowd's offer to make him king (6:15). Celebrities may ride to success on the applause of the crowd, but God's servants know better. By doing miracles during the feast, at the "official city," Jesus could muster a crowd, reveal himself as Messiah, and overcome the enemy. The suggestion, of course, came from hearts and minds blinded by unbelief. This unbelief had been prophesied in Psalm 69:8 "I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother's sons."

It was not the right time for Jesus to show himself to the world (14:22ff). He lived on a "divine timetable" marked out by the Father (2:4; 7:6, 8, 30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1). In addition, he was exercising caution because he knew the Jewish leaders wanted to kill him. Though they were "religious"

leaders, they were a part of “the world” that hated Jesus because he exposed their evil works. By his character and ministry he revealed the emptiness of their religious system. Jesus was calling the people not to religion, but to eternal life in God.

In his response to his brothers Jesus was not being evasive. Rather he was exercising sensible caution. Suppose he told his brothers his plans, and they told somebody else? Could the information possibly get to the leaders? “I am going to the feast when the right time comes,” is what he said. After his family had gone, Jesus went to Jerusalem “under cover,” so as not to call attention to himself.

In our Lord’s actions, we see a beautiful illustration of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. The Father had a plan for his Son, and nothing could spoil that plan. Jesus did not tempt the Father by rushing to the feast, nor did he lag behind when the proper time had come for him to go. It requires spiritual discernment to know God’s timing.

Scene 2: Debate in the midst of the feast (7:11–36)

¹¹ Now at the Feast the Jews were watching for him and asking, "Where is that man?" ¹² Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him. Some said, "He is a good man." Others replied, "No, he deceives the people." ¹³ But no one would say anything publicly about him for fear of the Jews.

¹⁴ Not until halfway through the Feast did Jesus go up to the temple courts and begin to teach. ¹⁵ The Jews were amazed and asked, "How did this man get such learning without having studied?" ¹⁶ Jesus answered, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me. ¹⁷ If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. ¹⁸ He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him. ¹⁹ Has not Moses given you the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law. Why are you trying to kill me?"

²⁰ "You are demon-possessed," the crowd answered. "Who is trying to kill you?" ²¹ Jesus said to them, "I did one miracle, and you are all astonished. ²² Yet, because Moses gave you

circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a child on the Sabbath. ²³ Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath? ²⁴ Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment."

²⁵ At that point some of the people of Jerusalem began to ask, "Isn't this the man they are trying to kill? ²⁶ Here he is, speaking publicly, and they are not saying a word to him. Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Christ? ²⁷ But we know where this man is from; when the Christ comes, no one will know where he is from."

²⁸ Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, "Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, ²⁹ but I know him because I am from him and he sent me."

³⁰ At this they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his time had not yet come. ³¹ Still, many in the crowd put their faith in him. They said, "When the Christ comes, will he do more miraculous signs than this man?" ³² The Pharisees heard the crowd whispering such things about him. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees sent temple guards to arrest him. ³³ Jesus said, "I am with you for only a short time, and then I go to the one who sent me. ³⁴ You will look for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come."

³⁵ The Jews said to one another, "Where does this man intend to go that we cannot find him? Will he go where our people live scattered among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks? ³⁶ What did he mean when he said, 'You will look for me, but you will not find me,' and 'Where I am, you cannot come'?"

Jesus' debate with the Jews involved three groups: the religious leaders, the festival crowd (pilgrims), and the Jerusalem residents:

1. The religious leaders

First to debate Jesus were the religious leaders (John calls them “the Jews”) who were attached to the temple. These included the Pharisees and the chief priests (most of whom were Sadducees) as well as the scribes. They differed theologically, but agreed on one thing: their opposition to Jesus and their determination to get rid of Him.

The debate began before Jesus even arrived in the city, and it centered on his character (11–13). The religious leaders kept seeking Jesus, while the crowd kept arguing whether he was a good man or a deceiver. He would have to be one or the other, because a truly good man would not deceive anybody. Yes, Jesus is either what He claims to be, or he is a liar.

But when Jesus began to teach openly in the temple, the debate shifted to his doctrine (14–19). The Jews were amazed at what he taught because he did not have any credentials from their approved rabbinical schools. Because he lacked “proper accreditation” his enemies said that his teachings were nothing but private opinions and not worth much.

Jesus explained that his doctrine came not from men but from the Father. He had already made it clear that he and the Father were one in the works that he performed (5:17) and in the judgment that he executed (5:30). Now he claimed that his teachings also came from the Father, and he would make that astounding claim again (8:26, 38).

Jesus points out to them that the truth of his claim would be validated in doing what he taught. Verse 17 literally reads, “If any man is willing to do his [God’s] will, he shall know.” This explains why the Jewish leaders did not understand Jesus’ teachings: they had stubborn wills and would not submit to him (5:40).

Jesus is not here suggesting a shallow “taste test” (“try it you’ll like it”) but rather the deep personal commitment of a person to truth. The Jews depended on education and authorities and received their doctrine secondhand, but Jesus insisted that we must experience the authority of truth *personally*. The Jewish leaders were attempting to *kill Jesus*, yet at the same time they claimed to understand God’s truth and obey it. This proves that an enlightened and educated mind is no guarantee of a pure heart or a sanctified will.

Satan offered Adam and Eve knowledge, but it was knowledge based on disobedience (Gen. 3:5). Jesus offered knowledge as the result of obedience: first the yoke of responsibility, then the joy of knowing God's truth. Dr. G. Campbell Morgan said it well: "When men are wholly, completely consecrated to the will of God and want to do that above everything else, then they find out that Christ's teaching is... the teaching of God."

2. The festival crowd

The second group to debate Jesus was the festival "crowd" in Jerusalem for the Feast. Note in verse 20 that they were amazed that anybody would want to kill Jesus. They were not up to date on all the gossip in the city and had to learn the hard way that Jesus was considered a law-breaker by the officials. The orthodox Jews broke the Sabbath laws when they had their sons circumcised on the Sabbath, so why could he not heal a man on the Sabbath? The crowd, of course, did not know that their leaders were out to kill Jesus; so they challenged his statement. But their reply contained a serious accusation—that Jesus had a demon. "You must be crazy to think that anybody wants to kill you!"

1. The Jerusalem residents

The third group to debate Jesus was the Jews who resided in Jerusalem (verse 25). They would have likely sided with the religious leaders. They knew that the rulers wanted to kill Jesus, and they were amazed that he was teaching openly and getting away with it! Perhaps, they thought, the rulers were convinced that indeed Jesus was the Messiah. So why were they not worshiping him and leading others to worship Him? Their question suggested a negative answer: "No, the rulers do not believe that he is the Christ, do they?" They were able to defend their conclusion with logic:

1. Nobody knows where the Christ comes from.
2. We know where Jesus of Nazareth came from.
3. Conclusion: Jesus cannot be the Messiah.

Once again, the people could not see the truth because they were blinded by what they thought were dependable facts. Jesus had met this same kind of resistance in the synagogue in Capernaum (6:42ff). Even the learned teachers—the "expert builders"—would not be able to identify the Chief Cornerstone, even though they had studied the God-given "blueprints" for centuries (Acts 4:11).

At this point (verse 28 and note also verse 37), Jesus raised his voice so that everybody could hear. He was probably speaking in a tone revealing irony: “Yes, you think you know me and where I came from! But really, you do not!” Then He explained why they did not know him: *they did not know the Father!* This was a serious accusation to make against an orthodox Jew, for the Jews prided themselves in knowing the true God, the God of Israel. But Jesus went even further, boldly asserting that he not only knew the Father, but was sent by him! He was once again claiming to be God! He was not simply *born* into this world like any other human; he was *sent* to earth by the Father. This means that he existed before he was born on the earth.

This was certainly a crisis hour in Jesus’ ministry, and some of the leaders tried to have him arrested; but “his time had not yet come” (it would, however, come about six months later). Many in the crowd of festival pilgrims put their faith in him (verse 31). It was a faith based on miracles, but at least it was a beginning.

The Pharisees and chief priests, who presided over the Jewish religious establishment resented the fact that the people were trusting in Jesus. Apparently these “believers” were not afraid to tell what they had done (verse 32). This time, the rulers sent members of the temple guard to arrest Jesus, but it was Jesus who “arrested” them! He warned them that they had but “a little while” to hear the truth, believe, and be saved (see John 12:35ff). It was not Jesus who was in danger, but those who wanted to arrest him!

As in previous messages, the people misunderstood what Jesus was saying. Within six months, Jesus would go back to the Father in heaven, and the unsaved Jews would not be able to follow him. What a contrast between “where I am, there ye cannot come” (verse 34) and “you also may be where I am” (14:3). Had these men been willing to do God’s will, they would have known the truth. Soon it would be too late.

Scene 3: Division at the end of the feast (7:37–52)

37 On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." 39 By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to

receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

40 On hearing his words, some of the people said, "Surely this man is the Prophet." 41 Others said, "He is the Christ." Still others asked, "How can the Christ come from Galilee? 42 Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?"

43 Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. 44 Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him. 45 Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring him in?" 46 "No one ever spoke the way this man does," the guards declared. 47 "You mean he has deceived you also?" the Pharisees retorted. 48 "Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? 49 No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them."

50 Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, 51 "Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?" 52 They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee."

On the last day of the feast of Tabernacles the priests marched seven times around the altar, chanting Psalm 118:25 and then poured out water while proclaiming the words of Isaiah 12:3: “Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” No doubt just as the water was being poured, symbolic of the water Moses drew from the rock (Exodus 17:6, Numbers 20:11), Jesus stood up in the midst of the crowd and in a loud voice for all to hear, shouted his great invitation to thirsty sinners: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink...”

Water for drinking is a primary symbol for the Holy Spirit in Scripture. Just as physical water satisfies thirst and produces fruitfulness, so the Spirit of God satisfies the longing of our souls and enables us to bear fruit unto eternal life. At the feast, the Jews reenacted an event from their history, that though dramatic, could never satisfy the heart. Jesus offered the living water that brings eternal satisfaction. Believers not only drink this water,

they become channels of living water to bless a thirsty world. The never-ending “artesian well” that Jesus promised the Samaritan women in 4:14 has now become a perpetually flowing stream.

The result of Jesus’ invitation to the crowd was mixed: Some defended him and some wanted him arrested. Some saw him as a “good man” and others as “a deceiver”? (7:12). Is he “the Christ”? (7:31) they asked. Is he the promised “Prophet”? (7:40; Deut. 18:15). If they had honestly examined the evidence, they would have discovered that, indeed, he was the Christ, the Son of God. Part of their doubt was because they identified Jesus with Galilee when in reality he was born in Bethlehem. Earlier (verse 27) some said that when the Messiah came no one would know where he was from. There were many competing views among the Jews about who the Messiah would be and where he would come from.

The temple officers returned to the Jewish council meeting empty-handed. It should have been relatively easy for them to arrest Jesus, yet they failed to do so. What stopped them? “No one ever spoke the way this man does!” was their defense. In other words, “This Jesus is more than a man! No mere man speaks as he does!” They were “arrested” by the Word of God, spoken by the Son of God.

Again, the leaders refused to face facts honestly but passed judgment on the basis of their prejudices and a superficial examination of the facts. “So some of the people have believed on Jesus! So what? These common people know nothing about the Law anyway! Have any *important* people—like ourselves—believed on him? Of course not!” They would use a similar argument to try to discredit the witness of the blind man that Jesus healed (9:34). God habitually chooses the weak and foolish to confound the wise and mighty.

No doubt the rulers would have sent the guard out again, but Nicodemus spoke up. This man is found three times in John’s Gospel (3:1; here and in 19:39). No doubt Nicodemus had been doing a great deal of thinking and studying since his first interview with Jesus, and now he comes to his defense—the rulers were trying to arrest Jesus before he had been given a fair and lawful trial as the Law requires.

You can hear the sarcasm and disdain in the reply of the rulers to Nicodemus: “Are you a lowly and despised Galilean too?” They refused to

admit that Nicodemus was right in asking for a fair trial, but the only way they could answer him was by means of ridicule. They challenged Nicodemus to search the prophecies to see if he could find any statement that a prophet would come out of Galilee. It was the common belief among these religious rulers that only in Judaea could pure religion be looked for, despite the fact that the great prophet Elijah was from the region of the Galilee.

Conclusion

You cannot help but feel sorry for the people described in this chapter—people looking for and longing for their Messiah, yet who responded to Jesus, their true Messiah and the Son of God, in all the wrong ways. Jesus' half brothers responded with disbelief; various people responded with debate; and the result was division. Had they willingly received the truth, and responded with sincere obedience, they would have ended up at the feet of Jesus, confessing him as Messiah and Son of God.

People today commit the same blunders, permitting their prejudices and superficial evaluations to blind them to the truth. And that is why we pray continuously for unbelievers—that their hearts will be open to their Savior's invitation as he calls out to them: 'come and drink.' May we be used of God to help them find this water unto eternal life.

Sermon Series is provided by Ted Johnston via the Senior Pastor Team of Tom and Alberta Ecker to assist ... Bible studies in series covering a book of the Bible.

This issue continues a series in the gospel of John with material from *The Bible Expository Commentary* by Warren Wiersbe, *The New Bible Commentary*, *The Parable of Joy* by Michael Card, and *The Gospel of John* by F.F. Bruce.