

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. (John 8:48-59)*

The Jews of Jerusalem: Scorn and Slander

I had a very interesting conversation last week. A professor from Wayne State University met with me to talk about the way conservative Christians view climate change. We wound up talking for a couple of hours and hit on a lot of different topics. He told me about an experience he had. He was listening to a report on National Public Radio about a special meeting of the United Methodist Church that took place last February. They were debating homosexuality and gay marriage. They played recordings of two different speakers. The professor said that one speaker argued that the Bible says that homosexuality is wrong. Then he asked, "Are we going to follow the Bible or not?" The other speaker was gay and said, "I feel a lot of hatred in this room right now and it hurts me." What was interesting to me was that the professor – who is a liberal – said that he didn't think that the first speaker showed any obvious hatred. He merely spoke to his conviction that God's Word is true. But his words were immediately characterized as hateful. That's the world we live in. And you know up? It's nothing new. Today's conversation with Christ shows us that for at least two thousand years, people have met the truth of the gospel with **scorn and slander**.

I.

Today's conversation with Christ is a little different from the other ones in this series. It's only a part of a much longer conversation. And rather than talking to just one or two people, Jesus was apparently talking with a crowd that John calls "the Jews of Jerusalem." It's clear that they were pretty hostile to Jesus. So, he experienced **scorn and slander**. It's just **easier than understanding Jesus' message**.

When we come into the conversation, these people were saying to Jesus, "**Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?**" But where did that charge of demon possession come from? All the demons Jesus had driven out. Rather than seeing that as a tremendous example of God's grace, they claimed it showed he was possessed by a chief demon. And what about calling him a Samaritan? Remember last week we talked about the very tense relationship between Jews and Samaritans. Jews wouldn't eat with Samaritans. They wouldn't even talk to them. They considered them to have a twisted and false version of the faith. But Jesus did talk to and eat with Samaritans. He even stayed in their homes.

So, in a sense, they chose charges that would stick. But they were engaging in what we today call a soundbite. Of course, the point of a soundbite isn't whether it's true. It's the fact that you can say it in an instant and then a person can talk until they're blue in the face trying to explain it, but nobody's listening anymore. Why would these people do that? Because they didn't believe Jesus. It was easier to dismiss him as a Samaritan or at least a Samaritan lover and as demon possessed than to think about what he was saying and doing. Why was that? Because Jesus' words and actions challenged their beliefs and prejudices. If treating Samaritans with love and reaching out to them with the gospel was the right way to deal with their doctrinal problems, then all those Jewish feelings of superiority were pure arrogance. If Jesus really was driving out

demons to rescue the children of God from the devil, then all the times they refused to listen to him must mean they were in error. And they just didn't want to consider the possibility that they had been sinning all this time.

So, they slandered Jesus. How did he answer? He denied their charge and then he returned to the gospel. He said, **"I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."** There is a very important lesson in this for us. We will encounter soundbite tactics – like standing on God's Word is hatred. Guess what? Not a new charge. People who want to sin often attack people who want to stand on God's Word. As frustrating as I find the media's love affair with the LGBTQ community, a far greater issue in our congregation is heterosexual marriage – and people getting divorced. If you get a divorce, I will want to sit down with you to talk about what's happening. I'm going to ask why you're getting divorced. God gives two acceptable reasons: your spouse has cheated on you or your spouse has left you. While there is some wiggle room in what exactly constitutes leaving you, it does not include, "All we ever did was fight," or "we just don't love each other anymore," or "it just wasn't working." Those things hurt. And they are sins. But they don't constitute a God pleasing reason for divorce. And do you know what happens, almost always, when I say that? People get mad at me.

When you talk to people outside the church, it's worse. Homosexuality is probably the biggest stick that people hit us with today, but there are others and there always will be. Unbelievers didn't play fair with Jesus and they aren't going to play fair with us. So, what do we do? What Jesus did. We deny the lies. And then we get back to the gospel. Because that is how the Spirit works. We challenge sin so that he convicts their hearts. And we bring the promises that only Jesus can make, the promises of life and forgiveness and love. And you know what? God works. He changes hearts. We might not see it, because you can't see what's happening in someone's heart. But God's power is real. And we may very well meet people in heaven that we never thought were going to get there. And when we talk to them, we might learn that our testimony had a lot more to do with that than we could see while we were talking to them here.

II.

Of course, unbelievers don't usually go down without a fight. Every person is born an unbeliever and resisting the gospel is what the Old Adam inside us does. That doesn't mean we've lost. It just means that we're following Jesus who faced **scorn and slander**. That's just **more natural than believing the truth**.

Jesus said, **"If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."** You know what that means, right? Jesus was not saying that all Christians will live until he comes back. He was saying that when these bodies die, our souls will live with him in heaven until he returns and raises these bodies. For us, death is just the doorway to eternal life. Now, clearly, it requires some understanding of the gospel to get all that and Jesus would not have criticized these people if they would've asked him to explain what he meant.

But that's not what happened. Instead, they mocked him: **"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. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?"** You know what's sad about that last question? It's exactly what Jesus was getting at – who he was. Jesus made the promise of beating death to get these people to ask who he really was. But rather than ask it seriously, they asked it as an attack. Abraham died. The prophets died. You don't think you're greater than they were, do you?

Jesus refused to be drawn into a pointless debate. He wasn't here to glorify himself. So, he merely testified to the truth. He said, **"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."** Now, that was the law. Jesus was accusing them of not following in the faith of Abraham. But how did Abraham see Jesus' day? God had revealed to him that one of his descendants would be the Savior of the world. Abraham trusted that promise and he rejoiced in it, even though he had very limited knowledge about what Jesus' life would be like.

But these Jews missed the point because they were not thinking spiritually. So they asked the question that comes naturally to everyone who doesn't get what Jesus met: **"You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham!"** This is a pretty telling comment because they knew Abraham was looking forward to the Messiah and they should've understood that Jesus was saying that he was that Messiah. But the sinner inside doesn't like to think spiritually. So Jesus said, **"I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!"** What did that mean? Abraham had been dead for more than two thousand years when Jesus said this, and Jesus claims he existed before Abraham was born. He was claiming to be eternal. But it's even deeper than that.

When God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, Moses asked God to tell him his name. God said, **“I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ”** In Hebrew, “I Am” is the very name of God. Jesus was claiming to be that God who appeared to Moses and who called Abraham to go to Canaan. You can tell that they finally understood because they picked up stones to kill him.

But there was no other response Jesus could give them. He claimed to be God because he was claiming to be their Savior. They denied and rejected him but Jesus continued to reach out to them in love with the truth. He only left them when they turned violent. And we may face the same kind of reaction. All the claims Jesus made that day are unacceptable to people today. Most people today reject the claim that Jesus really is the Son of God. They think that if Jesus existed at all, then obviously, he was a human being. But that’s all he was. No one can seriously expect people today to believe that God entered the womb of a virgin and caused her to conceive and give birth to a man who was really God. Of course, that’s exactly what the Scriptures say. We need to know that, because that God man is the one who came to save us.

So what do we do when we encounter heated opposition and mockery of the truth? Exactly what Jesus did. We hold to our confession. We point those people to the gospel in every way that we can. And we let the Holy Spirit work. Can we do that? It’s hard because it just doesn’t seem to us like it’s going to work. Over the years, I’ve had many conversations with many people who argued and seemed to reject the truth. Not many ever became believers, as far as I know. It’s tempting for us to think that we need some other way of bringing people in. But only the gospel will change hearts. We need to pay attention to the arguments of unbelievers so that we apply the law and the gospel to their lives and their hearts. But we have to trust that God will work in that message. There’s a voice in our heads that disagrees. It points to all the people who didn’t believe as proof that the gospel doesn’t get the job done. That voice is the unbeliever inside us. He is trying to lead us away from Jesus to our own ideas that God should listen to. He’s trying to get us to worship our own smarts.

Sometimes, though, the problem is we’re just too afraid to try. We don’t know enough. We don’t want to be embarrassed. You know what? That fear comes from that unbeliever, too. Faith in Christ is fearless. It does what Jesus calls us to do and trusts in the gospel he gave us. But on this side of heaven, not one of us has a perfect faith. Sin always gets in the way.

But that’s why Jesus came. To rescue us sinners from our failures and even from the unbelief that still infects our hearts and weakens our faith. When Jesus confronted these people, he was being the perfect witness that we can never be. Now God counts us as perfect. Jesus died and he paid for our fear and for our pride that thinks we know better than God. Jesus wiped all that sin away with his blood. He rose to tell us that we are forgiven. He rose to promise us that all of us who keep his word – that is, all of us who trust his promises – will never die. We will simply pass from this life to the next. Death won’t even interrupt our existence.

That promise gives us the strength and the wisdom we need to stand up for the truth, to answer arguments, and to witness for our Savior. It comforts us when people engage us with soundbites to lie about us. It gives us courage when we are attacked. It enables us to live Christ’s love, so that people like that professor, who is not a Christian, can see the truth that we speak as God’s witnesses, not out of hate. And the Holy Spirit will work through our words. He will reach into hearts. And he will make believers. And when we get to heaven, we will finally see how we fit into his plan. For now, it’s enough to know that we do fit into his plans. Trust in Jesus in the face of all scorn and slander. And share the good news. Amen.