

Message #32

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JESUS AND THE CLASH OF WORLD VIEWS

JOHN 8:21-29

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

A number of American scientists and science teachers credit Carl Sagan (PROJECTOR ON--- CARL SAGAN) for prompting them to choose a career in science. Carl Sagan was very effective in communicating a passion for science. Perhaps his most famous project was the 13-part video series "Cosmos." It was the most watched television series on National Public Television for many years. It was also used in many public school classrooms.

At the very beginning of the series Carl Sagan makes clear that he is promoting a world view that is shared by many other scientists. (CARL SAGAN QUOTATION) He says, "**The cosmos is all that is or was or ever will be.**" This viewpoint is reflective of many who buy into a philosophy that is sometimes labeled as scientism. This is the notion that everything in the universe can be explained by the physical laws of science.

It leaves unanswered the question: Where did the cosmos come from? Most of us would say that it reflects the work of a Creator, of God. (PROJECTOR OFF) Our world view is reflected in the opening verse of the Bible: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

Even within a monotheistic world view, a world view that says that there is one God, there are more specific world views. There are different ideas about God. The passage before us this morning describes a clash of world views, especially in regard to the identity of Jesus. This clash raises issues that should be of importance to every human being. Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?

In our study of John's Gospel we have seen that the Apostle John is seeking to show that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. But Jesus has encountered significant opposition, especially from the religious leaders of his day. Out of the clash in today's story, we will hopefully learn significant things about our own identity and destiny.

The Feast of Tabernacles has formed the background for much of #7 and #8. This was the best attended of the three annual feasts where all Jewish adult males were required to show up in Jerusalem. It was an eight day feast that celebrated the fall harvest and reminded the Jews about how God had provided for their ancestors during their forty years of wilderness wanderings. There was a water drawing ritual each day where the people were reminded about God's provision of water for them in the wilderness. It was in the midst of this ritual that Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the source of living water.

Each night of the feast four huge candelabra were also lit. This reminded the people about the pillar of fire and cloud that guided them in the wilderness. It was against this backdrop that Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the light of the world. Jesus was making claims to be Israel's Messiah. The religious leaders were not buying it. Tensions were rising.

I.

Last week in our study of vv. 12-20 of #8 I argued that it was probably day seven of the Feast of Tabernacles when Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the light of the world. This prompted a clash with the Pharisees, who were the legalists and traditionalists of that day. Most of the rabbis were Pharisees. They were well represented on the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism.

Verse 21 seems to imply that the dialogue that happens in our passage is a continuation of the earlier discussion. It deals with issues that have already been raised in #7 and #8. I have organized my message today around four issues that seem to be central to the passage and to the ongoing argument with the Pharisees. They have to do with the identity of Jesus and the standing of His opponents.

The first issue that I find in this passage is: WHERE AM I FROM? HEAVEN VS. WORLD. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. WHERE AM I FROM?) In v. 23 we read, "**He [Jesus] said to them, 'You [Pharisees] are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.'**" Jesus speaks in terms of two possible levels--- the above level and the below level. The below level is specifically said to be the world.

A reasonable inference would be that the above level is heaven, the realm of God and angelic creatures. At the beginning of this Gospel (JOHN 1:1-2), the author speaks of Jesus as the Word and declares about Him, **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”**

Later, Jesus has a discussion with Nicodemus, a leading teacher and rabbi of the Jews. In #3 v. 13 (JOHN 3:13) Jesus says, **“No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”** Jesus often refers to Himself as the Son of Man. So Jesus is claiming that He is from heaven in a unique sense, in a way different than any other human being.

Jesus also claims that His opponents are from below, from the world. (PROJECTOR OFF) We have seen that the Apostle John uses the word “world” in different ways. Sometimes it refers to the physical world. Sometimes it is used to describe the people who live in the world. Here and in other places, the word seems to refer to a system of thought, a way of thinking and being that is in rebellion against the true God. If you turn back to #7 and find v. 7, you will see the comment that Jesus made to His brothers just before this Feast of Tabernacles. In #7 v. 7 He said, **“The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil.”**

The same Apostle John also spoke of this evil world system in his first epistle, toward the end of the New Testament. In #1 of First John (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 JOHN 1:15), beginning in v. 15, we read, **“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. (1 JOHN 1:16) For all that is in the world--- the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life--- is not from the Father but is from the world.”**

Whether Jesus’ opponents on this day read the same meaning into this statement of Jesus about the world, we do not know. But as religious leaders of the Jews, they saw themselves as representatives of the God of heaven. They had accused Jesus of being a false prophet. So none of this would have gone over well with them.

We can see in their attitude and behavior the traits of worldliness that the Apostle John described in his letter. They were filled with pride. In the other Gospels the rabbis are accused of walking around in long robes and wanting respectful greetings and seeking chief seats in synagogues and places of honor at banquets. (Mark 12:38-39) The desires of the flesh and of the eyes were evident in the corrupt system that they ran in the temple. They had a monopoly on money changing and the sale of temple sacrifices, for which they got a financial cut. Then also they let this business take place in the holy temple.

The challenge for us who are Christian people is to check ourselves to see whether our values and behavior are more reflective of heaven or the world around us. Where do the desires of the flesh and of the mind and the pride of life have a hold on me? What is it that I am coveting that does not belong to me?

Money magazine did a survey of people who were making New Year's resolutions for 2016. They found that the number one area of resolution had to do with enjoying life to the fullest. Is that the primary reason that we are here on this earth--- to enjoy ourselves? Is it really all about me? Our example as Christians is Jesus, who said that He came from heaven not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.

II.

A second area of clash in this passage has to do with identity. WHO IS MY FATHER? GOD VS. THE DEVIL (II. WHO IS MY FATHER?...) This seems to be an issue addressed in vv. 26-27 and 29. In Jewish culture paternal lineage was very important. People in the Old Testament were typically identified in terms of their fathers. Sometimes this identification would go back several generations. We did a study of Nehemiah on Sunday mornings a couple of years ago. I counted up in my concordance 113 times in that relatively short book where people are identified by name and then as the son of someone else.

We saw in our passage last week that the Pharisees demanded two witnesses to testify that the things which Jesus was saying were true. So Jesus added the testimony of His Father to His own words. They knew that Joseph was dead. They also had heard stories that Jesus was born out of wedlock. They seemed to be slow to catch on that Jesus was claiming that God was His Father.

Now in vv. 26 & 27 we read, **“I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.’ They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father.”** The claim from Jesus that God is His Father in a unique sense is frequently cited in this Gospel. Jesus often says that He has been sent by God and has been given a mission by Him. Part of that mission involves warnings to the supposed leaders of God's people. Because of their worldliness, they are not recognizing Jesus as being God's Son. The broader message to the world is that God sent Jesus so that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life.

Jesus' claims to have God as His Father, as here, frequently seem to go over the heads of these religious leaders. At other times they seem to get it, but they immediately want to kill Jesus for blasphemy, for claiming to be equal with God. The problem was not that Jesus needed to be a more effective communicator. In that, there is some measure of encouragement for us preacher and teacher types. The problem was that these people were spiritually blind. They did not recognize the light of the world standing among them. They were characterized by worldliness. They missed the big picture and instead complained about technical details like the right number of witnesses to testify to the truth.

In the 1700s there was a British farmer who had a remarkable mathematical ability. His name was Jedidiah Buxton. He never learned how to write, but he could do these complicated mathematical calculations in his head. For example, he could multiply a nine digit number by another nine digit number and get the right answer.

In 1754 Jedidiah was invited to appear before the Royal Society in London. He amazed the people there in the audience. He was also invited to attend a play in Drury Lane Theatre, *Richard III*. After the play, he was asked what he thought about it. Jedidiah responded, **"The only thing I saw was a little man who strutted about the stage and repeated 7,956 words."** Jedidiah missed the big picture. The Pharisees were like that. They missed the big picture that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures had sent His Son to save them in fulfillment of the prophecies in His Word. That is the big picture that we do not want to miss either.

In v. 29 in our passage, Jesus also says, **"And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him."** This Jesus claims to be a perfect son, who always follows the direction of His Father.

A few months ago I met a man in my mother's church who claimed to have achieved the state of sinless perfection. He was divorced. So I was curious to know what his wife thought about that. There are a few Christian groups who claim that sinless perfection is possible for committed Christians. Jesus said that the greatest commandment was to love the Lord our God with all of our heart and soul and mind. It seems to me that it is unrealistic to think that any of us can ever do this all of the time. Never to be inappropriately angry or jealous or covetous or lustful? Jesus was able to do this because He was also God. He had a unique relationship with His Heavenly Father.

The clash with the Pharisees came because they had a different father. Their father is not identified in our passage. But if you will look down to v. 44 in this same chapter, you will see what Jesus says about

these guys: **“You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do 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 lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”**

There would appear to be only two options available in terms of the spiritual father that we humans have available to us--- God or the devil. We are born with a sin nature and are by nature children of the devil. The good news is that we can be adopted by God. In the first chapter of this book, the Apostle John (JOHN 1:12) told his audience, **“But to all who did receive him [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...”** There is a choice available to us in terms of the spiritual father that we will have.

III.

The third question addressed in our passage is: WHO AM I? GOD VS. SINNERS (III. WHO AM I...) The issue is addressed in vv. 24 & 25. Jesus says, **“I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.’ So they said to him, ‘Who are you?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Just what I have been telling you from the beginning.’”**

This is an important and profound question. Who am I? Carl Sagan says that we humans are products of an impersonal universe. If that is the case, morality is utilitarian at best. It is a practical matter. We should do whatever is useful. But there is no ultimate accountability, other than the laws of the places where we live. Other than that, we are free to do what we want to do. Maybe it is somehow nice not to hurt others.

In our passage we are dealing with a world view that involves God. The issue at hand is the identity of Jesus. Who is He? The Pharisees are skeptical about His claims to be the Messiah and the light of the world and the source of living water. At times it seems like this Jesus is being blasphemous. The force of their question probably had a negative nuance to it: Who do you think you are?

The scholars are uncertain about the exact grammatical meaning of v. 25. Some think that it was intended as a question. Some think that it was a statement. The meaning is probably close to what our ESV translation has. “I have been telling you from the beginning of My public ministry about who I am. I am the One sent from God the Father.” In effect, He has claimed to be the Messiah, the Son of God. The Pharisees are just not buying it.

Verse 24 actually contains the primary claim of Jesus. Our translation misses the force of that claim. (EGO EIMI) In Greek, it is *ego eimi*. Literally it is "I am." These two words would have reminded Jewish listeners of a passage in Exodus #3. There God calls Moses when he is living in the desert to go to Egypt and to lead the Hebrews out of slavery. Moses is reluctant to do that. Eventually he agrees, and Moses asks God whom he should tell the Hebrews has sent him. (EXODUS 3:14) In v. 14 of #3 we are told, **"God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.'"**

In Hebrew, the name is a form of the verb "to be." It is *hayah*, from which we get the name YHWH, or Jehovah. So many commentators argue from this that God's description of Himself is "The Self-Existent One." Self-existence is an essential quality of the God who is there.

The Greek translation of the Old Testament was around at the time of Jesus. It does not use *ego eimi* to translate "I am has sent me to you." It uses a Greek term that means "the Being." Literally it says "the Being has sent me to you." But the Greek words in our verse are used several times in Isaiah to describe God. In Isaiah #43 v. 10 (ISAIAH 43:10) we find this: **"You are my witnesses,' declares the Lord, 'and my servant whom I have chosen that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me."** The Greek translation of the Old Testament here has *ego eimi*--- "I am." It is the same as in our verse.

Three verses later in Isaiah #43 (ISAIAH 43:13) the same expression is used. The Lord says, **"Also henceforth I am he; there is none who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can turn it back?"** The Greek terminology is the same. The normal expectation in Greek is that "I am" is followed by a noun. "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world." To simply have "I am" is unusual. The statement by Jesus in our passage is a clear reference to Old Testament passages where the terminology is used of God. So Jesus before these Pharisees is claiming to be God. Yet He is also speaking of God as being His Father. So there is a distinction within the Godhead between God the Father and God the Son.

The charge that Jesus makes in v. 24 is that His opponents are sinners. But the New Testament elsewhere makes it clear that all human beings, with one exception, are also sinners. (ROMANS 3:23) In Romans #3 v. 23 the Apostle Paul writes, **"...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."** Since the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, all human beings are infected with a sin nature. We are created in the image of God. This gives us great value and worth. Yet our entire being is tainted with sin. The ultimate penalty for sin is death.

Thus we have another clash of world views. Who am I? Am I a sinner in need of total transformation, or am I a good person who simply needs moral improvement. I sat in a class in Bridgeport, Connecticut, years ago taught by a Conservative rabbi who said that we humans simply need moral improvement. Jesus says that we are sinners who are children of the devil in need of radical transformation. The basis for that transformation is the sacrifice that the God-man Jesus is soon to make.

IV.

The fourth question is WHERE AM I GOING? HEAVEN VS. HELL (IV. WHERE AM I GOING?...) This issue is found in vv. 21-22, 24, and 28. According to v. 21, **“So he said to them again, ‘I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.’”** It is not immediately clear where Jesus is going. It is also not immediately clear in what way these religious leaders will seek Him. It is true that when they discover the empty tomb that they will try to find His body. It is perhaps more likely that Jesus means that they will continue to seek a Messiah who fits their requirements.

The result is that they will die in their sin--- singular. Some think that Jesus is speaking about the sin of unbelief, perhaps specifically the sin of rejecting Jesus. I am more inclined to think that Jesus is speaking about their situation characterized by sin. They have a sin nature and a situation that is characterized by legal guilt before a holy God. It is for this situation that Jesus came to die. In John #1 (JOHN 1:29) the author speaks about the declaration of John the Baptist: **“The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”**

Jesus was going to die a sacrificial death on the cross which would pay the penalty for the sin of the world. But then He would rise from the dead and ascend into heaven. These enemies of Jesus would not be able to join Him in heaven. In Hebrews #9 v. 27 (HEBREWS 9:27) we read, **“And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment...”** Unless these opponents change their opposition to Jesus, they face divine judgment.

Verse 22 in our text reads, **“So the Jews said, ‘Will he kill himself, since he says, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come’?”** (PROJECTOR OFF) The term “the Jews” refers to the religious leaders, to these Pharisees who stand in opposition to Jesus. The irony is that these same men are plotting to have Jesus killed. The double irony is that Jesus will lay down His life to provide the sacrifice for sins, but it will be at the hands of these same religious leaders.

Skipping down to v. 24, Jesus says, **“I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.”** Here “sin” is plural. The multitude of their transgressions will result in their death. This is not just physical death, but spiritual death.

There is, however, an escape clause. The opportunity to believe provides an escape from death in their sins. The opportunity to go to heaven is still available. The object of the necessary belief is Jesus. Notice that Jesus again describes Himself as *ego eimi*--- I am. Recognition of the deity of Jesus is part of this required belief system.

The one human responsibility is belief. It is not good works or meritorious service. With the exception of the Christian kid on the team, the other Thai young people who were rescued from the cave were ordained on Wednesday to become Buddhist novices. According to the Associated Press, **“It’s believed that once a person is ordained they gain merit that is also extended to their parents.”** (AP, 7/25/2018) The only merit in true Christianity that is acceptable to God is the sacrifice of His Son. To benefit from that sacrifice, we must simply put our trust in Jesus.

According to v. 28 in our passage, **“So Jesus said to them, ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.’”** Here is the explanation about how this sin situation is rectified and how people can go to heaven.

It has to do with Jesus being lifted up. That is the literal meaning of the Greek verb. But most often in the New Testament it has a figurative meaning of “to be exalted.” Thus in Luke #18 v. 14 (PROJECTOR ON--- LUKE 18:14) Jesus says, **“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”**

The Apostle John is fond of recognizing double meanings in the story of Jesus. So it is likely here that he sees Jesus here as referring to being lifted up physically on to a cross. Yet this crucifixion will also involve an exaltation. This is a wonderful thing that Jesus does. The Son of God humbles Himself by becoming a human being and dying on a cross to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Somehow, Jesus says, these religious leaders will recognize that He is the “I am” through His crucifixion. Perhaps Jesus is saying that their intellects will witness the resurrection and the empty tomb and will tell

them that He is God, though their stubborn will continues to deny it. Perhaps Jesus is saying that a few among them will truly be converted through this lifting up of Jesus.

Indeed, we know from the Biblical record that some among the religious leaders were drawn to Jesus through the crucifixion. According to Matthew #27 v. 51 (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 27:51), at the moment that Jesus died on the cross, this also happened: **“And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.”** This was a very thick curtain that barred access into the Holy of Holies, and it was located in the inner part of the temple. The tearing of the curtain and the death of Jesus signified that the way into the presence of God was now open. Who would know that the curtain was torn? The priests.

In Acts #6 v. 7 (ACTS 6:7) we have this additional testimony: **“...the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”** The priests had been in opposition to Jesus. What accounted for the change? I think that the testimony of the torn curtain at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion was a significant event that was used by God to bring many of these men to faith in Jesus.

The lifting up of Jesus on the cross was also the final fulfillment of prophecies made about the Messiah in the Book of Isaiah seven hundred years before the coming of Christ. (ISAIAH 53:7) Beginning in v. 5 of #53 in Isaiah we read, **“But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. (ISAIAH 53:6) All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--- every one--- to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (ISAIAH 53:7) He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. (ISAIAH 53:8) By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? (ISAIAH 53:9) and they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.”** Jesus’ body was placed in the tomb of the rich man Joseph of Arimathea. All of this sounds like a description of the lifting up of Jesus on the cross and events associated with it. These verses are still instrumental today in convincing some Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So we humans have a choice regarding our ultimate destiny. Years ago Billy Graham had a crusade in Melbourne, Australia. Afterward this letter appeared in the Melbourne newspaper: **“After hearing Billy Graham and viewing him on television and seeing reports and letters concerning his mission here, I am heartily sick of the type of religion that insists my soul and everyone else’s need saving, whatever**

that means. I have never felt that I was lost nor do I feel that I daily wallow in the mire of sin although repetitious preaching insists that I do. Give me a practical religion that teaches gentleness and tolerance that acknowledges no barriers of color or creed, that remembers the aged and teaches children goodness and not sin. If in order to save my soul, I must accept such a philosophy as I have recently heard preach[ed], I prefer to remain forever damned.”

Probably he got his wish. That was apparently the fate of most of Jesus accusers. It does not need to be ours. But we need to heed the advice of the seventeenth century English poet Francis Quarles, who wrote, **“He that has promised pardon on our repentance has not promised to preserve our lives till we repent.”** (*Treasury of David*, Spurgeon, 4:328) The point is that we should not put off a decision to trust in this Jesus, who died for our sins.