

Message #35

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LESSONS FROM JESUS' EXAMPLE OF DEALING WITH OPPOSITION

JOHN 8:48-59

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

As we move into another election season, the political rhetoric is becoming increasingly rancorous. The guy or gal in the other party is portrayed as evil, corrupt, incompetent, in the pocket of special interest groups and/or out of touch with working people. The media tends to feed the attacks. On policy issues, compromise seems more and more difficult.

Gone are the days when Ronald Reagan and Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O'Neil would get together in the White House, smoke cigars, and hammer out compromises. It used to be that Supreme Court nominees would be examined for competence and integrity. If there were no major scandals to be found, they would be approved with votes from the other party, even if there were major disagreements with the legal positions of the nominee.

Partisanship and philosophical divides have spilled over into the broader culture. It is hard for Christians not to get caught up in it. There is a danger that we can act unchristianly.

Rosaria Butterfield has been active in this cultural clash. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROARIA BUTTERFIELD). She got her PhD from Ohio State University and was professor of English and Women's Studies at Syracuse University. She cared about morality, justice, and compassion. Life with her lesbian partner was happy, meaningful, and full. Together they shared an interest in AIDS activism, children's health and literacy, Golden Retriever rescue, and their Unitarian Universalist church.

She wrote, **"The word *Jesus* stuck in my throat like an elephant tusk; no matter how hard I choked, I couldn't hack it out. Those who professed the name commanded my pity and wrath. As a university professor, I tired of students who seemed to believe that 'knowing Jesus' meant knowing little else.**

Christians in particular were bad readers, always seizing opportunities to insert a Bible verse into a conversation with the same point as a punctuation mark: to end it rather than deepen it. Stupid. Pointless. Menacing. That's what I thought of Christians and their god Jesus, who in paintings looked as powerful as a Breck Shampoo commercial model."

In 1992 Rosaria was almost pushed over the edge when she heard Pat Robertson tell the Republican National Convention, **"Feminism encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians."** She began researching the Religious Right. In 1997 she launched an attack against what she called the unholy trinity of Jesus, Republican politics, and patriarchy, in the form of an article in the local newspaper about the evil group Promise Keepers. One response that she got changed her life. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We have been making our way through the Gospel According to John. We have seen that opposition to Jesus' claims about Himself is rising. The setting in Chapters 7 & 8 is the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem. That eight day feast commemorated the fall harvest and the provision of God for the Hebrews in their wilderness wanderings in their escape from Egypt under the leadership of Moses centuries ago. (PROJECTOR ON--- TEMPLE 3)

At the climax of the feast on day seven, Jesus was in this inner courtyard when he declared that He was the light of the world. This provoked the anger of the religious leaders who were led by the Pharisees. They were the dominant party among the rabbis. They were traditionalists and legalists. One of the things that made them angry was that Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, which violated their interpretation of the Sabbath Commandment. Last time, two weeks ago, we saw that these Pharisees accused Jesus of having an illegitimate birth. Jesus said that that these Pharisees had adopted worldly values and reflected a connection with their spiritual father, the devil. Today, this conflict reaches a climax. We will find in vv. 48-59 that there are three cycles in which the Pharisees attack Jesus, and Jesus responds.

I.

So in vv. 48-51 of #8, which is on p. 895 in the black Bibles, we find THE FIRST CYCLE: CHARGE, TRUTH, OFFER. (I. THE FIRST CYCLE: CHARGE...) According to v. 48, **"The Jews answered him, 'Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?'"** They are responding to the allegation that Jesus made beginning in v. 42 that they were not really connected to the God of the Bible. Jesus said that they had worldly values and showed a closer connection to the devil. Jesus, meanwhile, claimed that He was without sin and that He was speaking the words of God.

The term “the Jews” in v. 48 was used by the Apostle John to refer to the religious leadership in Jerusalem who opposed Jesus and His mission. In v. 13 they are specifically described as Pharisees. The charge from them here is that Jesus is a Samaritan. (SAMARIA MAP) Samaria was originally part of the northern kingdom of Israel. Around 700 BC Israel was overrun by the Assyrians. Many of the Jews were exiled. Gentiles were brought in from other parts of the Assyrian Empire. They intermarried with the remaining Jews. This mixed race people adopted a form of Judaism that accepted only the first five books of the Bible. The Samaritans were rejected by traditional Judaism centered in Jerusalem. Back in #4 we saw that Jesus had an encounter with a woman of Samaria at a well, which resulted in a positive response to Jesus and His mission from the people of her Samaritan village. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The nature of the charge here that Jesus is a Samaritan is unclear. It may simply be a claim that Jesus is unorthodox in His teaching. He is not following traditional Judaism as it is interpreted by the Pharisees. This is the only time in the four Gospels where Jesus is accused of being a Samaritan. Jesus does not directly answer the charge in the following verses.

Jesus has several times been accused of being possessed by a demon. We saw this in #7 v. 20. The charge is also recorded in the other Gospels. It is difficult for these accusers to deny the miracles that Jesus has performed. Too many witnesses have seen these miracles, including some of the Pharisees. So if Jesus does not fit their picture of what a representative from God looks like, He must get His power from demonic forces.

The Pharisees here are resorting to name calling. Philosophers call this an “ad hominem” attack. The discussion is devolving into emotionalism. There is no rational argument here. This too often happens in clashes that involve world views and politics and religion. Sometimes Christians can be guilty of this. This charge by the Pharisees is the first part of the cycle that we see repeated three times in this passage.

In v. 49 we read, **“Jesus answered, ‘I do not have a demon; but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me.’”** For whatever reason, Jesus ignores the Samaritan charge. He does address the demon charge. He responds with truth. The Jews never spoke of God as a personal Father to them. Jesus does. Because of His unique relationship with God, Jesus says that the accusers should respect Him. They do not.

Jesus is indeed making extraordinary claims. But He is not doing it from arrogance, dementia, insanity, demon possession, or some kind of connection with the Samaritans. He says in v. 50, **“Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge.”**

The Apostle Paul said this about Jesus (PROJECTOR ON--- PHILIPPIANS 2:5-6) in Philippians #2: **“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, (PHILIPPIANS 2:7) but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (PHILIPPIANS 2:8) And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”**

The Son of God had all of the glory that He needed in heaven. In becoming a human being, He gave up much of this glory. The incarnation was an act of humility. This humility culminated in His death on the cross. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus says that He leaves the seeking of glory to His Father. It is the Father’s job to do look after that. It is ironic that the death of Jesus, which the Pharisees are seeking, will end up in bringing great glory to Jesus. It will also mean judgment for these enemies.

Jesus continues in v. 51, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word he will never see death.”** Remember, the words “truly, truly” appear before important pronouncements from Jesus. After the charge against Jesus from the Pharisees comes a word of truth from Jesus. Now, in effect, Jesus is making a gracious offer. There is still the opportunity offered to respond positively to Jesus.

Notice that this offer is extended to anyone--- not just to Jews, but to Gentiles; not just to supporters, but to enemies. It is offered even to people like Rosaria Butterfield, who had no patience with people who promoted Jesus.

The meaning of keeping the word of Jesus is not explained here. It would seem to at least include embracing His message, accepting His claims about who He is and what His mission is and how He relates to God the Father. Later, it becomes clear that keeping Jesus’ word also means accepting the significance of His death and resurrection. John and the other apostles claim that Jesus’ death accomplished the payment for the penalty of the sins of the world. Any benefit from this requires a response of trust in this Jesus.

The payoff, Jesus says, is that those who keep His word will never see death. It is evident that the followers of Jesus did experience physical death. So it would seem that Jesus is talking about spiritual death, about the avoidance of eternal judgment. A couple of chapters later, (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 11:25-26A) we find this: **“Jesus said to her [Martha], ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.’”**

So in this first cycle we find Jesus dealing with opposition. There is a charge made against Him by the Pharisees. He answers this with truth. He also extends an offer. That offer is still available to us today. Whoever believes in Jesus, will never experience eternal death. We will receive the gift of eternal life.

II.

In vv. 52-56 we are exposed to THE SECOND CYCLE: CHARGE, TRUTH, OFFER. (II. THE SECOND CYCLE: ...)
In v. 52 we read, **“The Jews said to him, ‘Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’”** The religious leaders renew their charge that Jesus has a demon. They are taking Jesus at a literal level when He speaks of death. Abraham and the prophets of the Old Testament were on the top of their list of Biblical heroes. They all died. To make the claim that embracing Jesus would result in the avoidance of death is crazy. This Jesus must be possessed.

Jesus is also putting His words above those of the prophets. That is ridiculous. This Jesus is way out of line. Who does He think that He is? Thus the charge and the attack against Jesus is renewed.

The Pharisees add in v. 53, **“Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?”** This is craziness. This Jesus cannot seriously think that He is on the same level as these Old Testament heroes. Thus the charge and attack upon Jesus is renewed in this second cycle. Notice the response of truth that comes from Jesus in the next three verses.

Verse 54: **“Jesus answered, ‘If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’”** This is the truth statement. Jesus, not the Pharisees, is the true representative of God. He is the true son of Abraham.

How is it that the Father glorifies Jesus? By answering the prayers of Jesus, by empowering Him to perform miracles, and by revealing Himself at the baptism of Jesus. In Matthew #3 vv. 16 & 17 (MATTHEW 3:16), we are told, **“And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; (MATTHEW 3:17) and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.’”** Thus the Father was glorifying the Son.

Then also in the coming events involving the Crucifixion, God the Father would glorify Jesus Christ. On the night before His death, Jesus prayed to His Heavenly Father. (JOHN 17:5) According to John 17:5, Jesus said, **“And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”** The Father would glorify Jesus in His death, by which Jesus would pay the penalty for the sins of the world. He would glorify Jesus by means of the Resurrection, which would demonstrate that Jesus truly was God. Then the Father would glorify Jesus in welcoming back into heaven, as He ascended from the Mount of Olives in the view of His followers. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus continues to speak truth in v. 55: **“But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word.”** The issue is truth. Who really knows God? There are some among our cultural elites today who deny that there is absolute truth. But the common assumption here is that there is truth. The issue is: Who has it? Who truly knows God? Jesus makes the counter charge that the Pharisees are not telling the truth. Perhaps the situation is heated. There were probably religious pilgrims who were observing this discussion between Jesus and the religious leaders. They had been dominated in the religious arena by the rabbis, who were mostly Pharisees. The rabbis were leading the people astray. So it would have been wrong for Jesus not to make the truth clear.

Jesus addresses the Pharisees in v. 56: **“Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.”** The two issues here are: When did Abraham rejoice, and what is the “my day” Jesus is talking about? My guess is that there was no single event that Jesus has in mind here when Abraham rejoiced. There were several points in Abraham’s life when he may have had glimpses of a future Messiah.

There was an initial promise that came in the first formulation of the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis #12. (PROJECTOR ON--- GENESIS 12:3) In v. 3 God told Abraham, **“...and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”** There were promises repeated to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son through whom the world would be blessed. When God ordered Abraham to offer up Isaac, the son of promise, He provided a ram as a substitute. The place was the future site of the temple in Jerusalem.

It was also near the place where Jesus would one day be crucified. Rabbi Akibah also describes a tradition in Judaism that when God signed the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, God disclosed insights to him about a future Messiah.

As to the reference to the “my day” of Jesus, I suspect that all of Jesus’ earthly ministry may have been in mind. The first and second coming and everything in between may have been part of Jesus’ general reference.

It is not obvious or direct, but there is perhaps an implied offer here to the members of Jesus’ audience to participate in this joy of Abraham, to rejoice in the Jesus who was standing before them, to embrace Him and His message. That offer still stands today.

III.

In vv. 57-59 we come to THE THIRD CYCLE: CHARGE, TRUTH, REJECTION. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE THIRD CYCLE...) There is a slightly different pattern here from the first two cycles. The cycle concludes with a clear rejection of Jesus and His claims. The Apostle John writes in v. 57, **“So the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’”** The implied charge here is that Jesus is crazy. How can He claim that He has seen Abraham?

As to the reference to Jesus not yet being fifty years old, the chronology of His life indicates that Jesus was probably only in His thirties. These religious leaders may have picked the number fifty because it was a round number that was associated with maturity. Fifty was the age at which Levites retired from temple service. The basic issue is how Jesus can talk about knowing Abraham in a personal way and knowing what made him rejoice.

Jesus provides the truthful answer in v. 58: **“Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’”** In vv. 24 & 28 Jesus used the same words to describe Himself. In that earlier context, His meaning was perhaps a bit ambiguous. Here the claim is clear. Jesus is identifying Himself with YHWH, the God of the Jews.

The reference goes back to the situation in the Sinai Desert when God called Moses to go back to Egypt and to lead his people out of slavery. Moses was reluctant. At one point he asked God whom he should

say had sent him. In Exodus #3 v. 14 (EXODUS 3:14) God replies, **“Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I am has sent me to you.’”** Jesus is telling these religious leaders that He is the “I am.”

In the grammatical context in v. 58 in our passage, we might expect that Jesus would say that He was before Abraham. He was around before Abraham, which claim would also point to His deity. But in using a present tense verb, Jesus is pointing toward His self-existence and eternity. This is consistent with the claim that the Apostle John made in v. 1 of this book when he said that Jesus was in the beginning with God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 59: **“So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.”** The religious leaders understood what Jesus was saying. They recognized that He was making a claim to be God. They just did not like it. They were outraged. They rejected Him. They wanted to kill Him.

Only the Roman governor had the legal authority to implement the death penalty. But these rabbis were so enraged and offended, that they tried to do Jesus in on the spot. In doing that they were violating their own law and the Torah which insisted that one being sentenced to death must have a proper trial and hearing before execution. Again these religious leaders were showing their hypocrisy.

Somehow Jesus avoids their evil intent. The temple was always crowded at these religious feasts. So it is not inconceivable that He could have quickly blended into the crowds. But there may also have been a supernatural element at work to protect Him.

So in #8 we see how the opposition to Jesus from the religious establishment grows and sets the stage for His coming crucifixion. We also see an example for us about how to respond to religious persecution. We Christians will face opposition toward our belief system. But we are to respond to such charges from our opponents with truth and an offer of the Gospel. Sometimes we will be rejected. But sometimes the Lord will use our witness to draw people to Himself.

Rosaria Butterfield was making strong charges toward Christians when she wrote a letter to the editor in Syracuse, New York, years ago. She received a lot of mail in response. She kept two boxes for these letters--- one for fan mail and one for hate mail. There was one letter she received that took a different tone. It defied her filing system. It claimed to promote truth, though it was a truth claim contrary to her own. Yet it was also inviting. It contained an offer.

The letter was from the pastor of the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church. Pastor Ken Smith asked a lot of questions in his letter: How did you arrive at your interpretations? How do you know you are right? Do you believe in God? The pastor did not make a lot of arguments. He asked about presuppositions. Rosaria did not know how to respond. So she threw it away. But it haunted her. She pulled it out of the recycling bin and stared at it for a week.

At the bottom of the letter was an invitation to call him. Finally, she did. The two of them had a long conversation on the phone. Ken invited Rosaria to his home to have dinner with he and his wife. Rosaria later wrote, **“Ken and his wife, Floy, and I became friends. They entered my world. They met my friends. We did book exchanges. We talked openly about sexuality and politics. They did not act as if such conversations were polluting them. They did not treat me like a blank slate. When we ate together, Ken prayed in a way I had never heard before. His prayers were intimate. Vulnerable. He repented of his sin in front of me. He thanked God for all things. Ken’s God was holy and firm, yet full of mercy. And because Ken and Floy did not invite me to church, I knew it was safe to be friends.”**
(Christianity Today, January 2013)

Rosaria began to read the Bible. She battled within herself with many of the claims about God that she encountered. She continued to engage with the Smiths. Then one Sunday she dragged herself out of bed and showed up at their church. She was conscious of the fact that in wearing a butch haircut she did not exactly fit in to this conservative church congregaiton. But she was welcomed.

She began to come to this church’s services more often. Rosaria writes, **“One Lord’s Day, Ken preached on John 7:17** [That is part of the discussion at the Feast of Tabernacles that we have been studying, isn’t it?] **‘If anyone wills to do (God’s) will, he shall know concerning the doctrine.’ This verse exposed the quicksand in which my feet were stuck. I was a thinker. I was paid to read books and write about them. I expected that in all areas of life, understanding came before obedience. And I wanted God to show me, on my terms, why homosexuality was a sin. I wanted to be the judge, not one being judged.**

“But the verse promised understanding after obedience. I wrestled with the question: Did I really want to understand homosexuality from God’s point of view, or did I just want to argue with him? I prayed that night that God would give me the willingness to obey before I understood. I prayed long into the unfolding of day. When I looked in the mirror, I looked the same. But when I looked into my heart through the lens of the Bible, I wondered, *Am I a lesbian, or has this all been a case of mistaken identity? If Jesus could split the world asunder, divide marrow from soul, could he make my true identity prevail? Who am I? Who will God have me to be?*

Then, one ordinary day, I came to Jesus, openhanded and naked. In this war of worldviews, Ken was there. Floy was there. The church that had been praying for me for years was there. Jesus triumphed. And I was a broken mess. Conversion was a train wreck. I did not want to lose everything that I loved. But the voice of God sang a sanguine love song in the rubble of my world. I weakly believed that if Jesus could conquer death, he could make right my world. I drank, tentatively at first, then passionately, of the solace of the Holy Spirit. I rested in private peace, then community, and today in the shelter of a covenant family, where one calls me 'wife' and many call me 'mother.'

Rosaria did indeed get married--- to a Presbyterian pastor. She and her husband have had children and they school them at home. Such is the power of the gospel. Such is the example of Jesus and Ken Smith in engaging those opposed to Christianity--- promoting truth and offering the gospel in a loving way.