

Message #34

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John

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JESUS AND ANCESTRY.COM

JOHN 8:37-47

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Ancestry has become big business. (PROJECTOR ON--- ANCESTRY.COM) Ancestry.com started out as a Mormon research outfit, as a tool for LDS members to baptize dead relatives. It has expanded beyond that base to reach others who are simply interested in tracing their family roots. Ancestry.com now has seven million customers and access to 16 billion records. A lot of people are curious about their ancestors.

Forty years ago, when I was single, I lived near a federal records repository. I spent several of my off days poring through microfilm census records to find out details about some of my ancestors. More recently, I discovered that Ellis Island has all of its immigration records digitized. So I went online and found my father's father listed on the passenger ship manifest that brought him from Liverpool to New York City. On my wife's side of the family, her grandmother and aunt did research that supposedly showed that they were descendants of one of the families on the Mayflower, which would mean that my kids have Pilgrim roots. It turns out that there are actually 20 million Americans who can trace their roots to those Pilgrims.

It is a normal thing for us human beings to have interest in our family origins. Ancestry was a big deal in Bible times, too. It is an issue in the passage before us this morning. The Son of God deals with the subject of ancestry and describes the significance that it should have for us. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We are making our way through the Gospel of John. Chapters 7 & 8 describe a key incident involving Jesus and His attendance at the Feast of Tabernacles. The center of celebration was the temple in Jerusalem. (PROJECTOR ON--- JERUSALEM TEMPLE 8) The annual feast commemorated the fall harvest and God's provision for their ancestors during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness after their escape from slavery in Egypt.

At that feast Jesus claimed that He was the fulfillment of symbols embedded in the rituals of the feast. He told the religious pilgrims gathered there that He was the source of living water, and He was the light of the world.

(TEMPLE 3) Much of the discussion recorded in #8 took place on day 7 of this feast in the Court of Women, pictured here in this inner courtyard. Opposition from the religious leaders was rising. Last week we saw that Jesus said that freedom from sin was available to those who would make a connection with Him. Today we shall see that the issue is ancestry.

I.

Thus in vv. 37-40 we find that THE VALUE OF PHYSICAL ANCESTRY IS LIMITED. (I. THE VALUE OF PHYSICAL ANCESTRY...) In v. 37 Jesus says, **“I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you.”** In v. 13 of this chapter we are told that the primary source of opposition to Jesus is coming from the Pharisees. Most of the rabbis identified themselves as Pharisees. They had a strong presence on the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism that was allowed by the Romans to have considerable authority not only over religious matters, but also over civil affairs. The Pharisees were legalists and traditionalists. They had developed detailed interpretations of the Old Testament law. They were very religious. One of the reasons that they were opposed to Jesus was that He had healed a number of people on the Sabbath, which was a violation of their interpretation of the Sabbath commandment.

In v. 30 of this chapter we were told by the author John that many of the people listening to Jesus believed in Him. Some of these people may have been the religious leaders. Some of them may have been religious pilgrims who were listening in on the conversation. It becomes clear that this belief in Jesus is very shallow. The dominant perspective in the people addressing Jesus is that they want Him dead.

Jesus in v. 37 acknowledges the physical descent of all of these people from Abraham. There is value in this ancestry. In Genesis #12 God gave several wonderful promises to Abraham and his descendants. (GENESIS 12:2) Beginning in v. 2 God said, **“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. (GENESIS 12:3) I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”**

These promises are further developed in Genesis to include the promise of possession of a certain territory and possession of that territory permanently. These promises are sealed by means of an unconditional covenant, which meant that the certainty of their fulfillment was dependent upon the Lord alone. The reestablishment of Israel as a nation seventy years ago, after 2000 years of nonexistence, is a demonstration that these promises are still in effect.

In Romans #2 the Apostle Paul explains that even the descendants of Abraham are sinners. Thus in #3 vv. 1 & 2 (ROMANS 3:1-2) he poses this question and provides an answer: **“Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.”** So the descendants of Abraham are blessed to have been entrusted with the Hebrew Scriptures. In Chapters 9-11 in Romans, Paul adds that the Jews are objects of God’s special love, they are recipients of certain unconditional promises, and they have the assurance of a future restoration to world prominence. So there is a certain value and benefit that Jews have by virtue of their physical descent from Abraham. (PROJECTOR OFF)

But there is a problem identified in v. 37 of our passage. These Jews are not treating Jesus well. His word has no place in them. The original Greek verb was used to describe the flowing of water and the growing of a plant and the multiplication of a man’s financial investment. Jesus’ word is not flowing or growing or multiplying in these Jews who have been exposed to the teaching of Jesus.

In this challenge to them, there is also a challenge to us. Is Jesus’ word growing in us? Are we embracing it and studying it and growing in our understanding of it and showing any evidence of transformation by it? Many of us guys show a natural inclination to talk about sports and the things that are going on in that world. Do we show a similar inclination to talk about the things related to Jesus’ word?

In vv. 38-40 Jesus continues, **“I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.’ They answered him, ‘Abraham is our father.’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did.”** The ancestry connection of these Jews to Abraham is a big deal to them. But two times already in this passage Jesus has said that they are seeking to kill Him. Jesus says that this behavior demonstrates a disconnect with that ancestry.

In Genesis #18 Abraham in his old age is still without a promised son. Three men show up to visit him. Abraham prepares a special meal for them. It soon becomes apparent that these three individuals are

no ordinary men. One of them is identified as “the Lord.” This one promises Abraham that he will have a son in the next year. He also announces the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This individual is generally recognized by students of the Bible as the Son of God, the preincarnate Christ. He has been warmly welcomed by Abraham into his house.

Now this discussion is taking place in God’s house, in the temple which was designed for worship of the triune God. But instead of welcoming the Second Person of the Trinity into His house, the religious leaders are seeking to have Him killed.

Prior to Genesis #18 Abraham had an encounter with Melchizedek. A northern alliance of city-states had conquered Sodom and Gomorrah. In doing that, they took captive Lot, Abraham’s nephew. Abraham went after them and defeated them in a surprise night attack. On the way back home, he encountered Melchizedek in Jerusalem. Melchizedek is described as a priest of God. Abraham gives him a tenth of the booty that he has captured.

Now Jesus is standing in the Court of the Women, which is also referred to as the treasury, because it contains receptacles where the Jews can deposit their tithes and offerings. Jesus stands before the religious leaders not just as the representative of God, but as God in the flesh. Not only are these people unwilling to give gifts to the representative of God, they want to kill Him. They are far from doing the works of Abraham.

Nevertheless, the descendants of Abraham remain confident that their connection with Abraham is enough to guarantee a positive standing before God. There are early writings outside of the Bible that describe this Jewish confidence in the value of physical ancestry. There is a Jewish commentary of the Book of Genesis that comes from the third or fourth century AD. Scholars suspect that it reflects Jewish thinking from an earlier time. (PROJECTOR ON--- GENESIS RABBAH) At one point the Jewish writer says, **“In the Hereafter Abraham will sit at the entrance to Gehenna, and permit no circumcised Israelite to descend therein.”** (*Genesis Rabbah* 48:8)The text goes on to say that the only exception will be those who have sinned “very much.”

Another such document is the Mishnah Sanhedrin. (MISHNAH SANHEDRIN) It reads like this: **“All Israel (even those who were executed by the court for their transgressions) have a portion in the World to Come, for it is written: ‘Your people are all righteous; they shall inherit the land forever.’ (Isaiah 60:21)”** (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 10:1)The only exceptions that it lists are those who do not believe in the

resurrection of the dead, which was a fundamental doctrine of the Pharisees, disbelief in the law, and opposition to the teachers of the law.

Justin Martyr was a church leader who lived in the second century. He quoted the views of his Jewish opponents in *Dialogue of Trypho*. (JUSTIN MARTYR QUOTE) According to him, Jewish leaders believed, **“They who are the seed of Abraham, according to the flesh, shall in any case, even if they be sinners and unbelieving and disobedient toward God, share in the eternal kingdom.”** Such an attitude reminds me of the Mafia and the relationship of their members toward the Catholic Church. Despite their misdeeds, many of them acted as though they were devoted members of the Church. All was well with God if they maintained a certain religious connection with the church.

Others of us may come from different Christian traditions. Yet perhaps we have been inclined to think that baptism as an infant protects us, or our religious tradition will somehow ensure that we get to heaven. But in the end, our behavior says something about our spiritual ancestry.

Thus Jesus told His audience that physical descent was insufficient to claim the true God as one’s ancestor. In Romans #2 (ROMANS 2:28) the Apostle Paul wrote, **“For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. (ROMANS 2:29) But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.”** Such is the case for us as well. The saying has often been quoted: “God has no grandchildren.” The point is that each of us needs to have a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ. The value of physical ancestry is limited.

II.

In vv. 41-43 we find that OUR SPIRITUAL ANCESTRY IS EVIDENCED BY OUR DEEDS AND OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS. (II. OUR SPIRITUAL ANCESTRY IS...) In v. 41 Jesus says, **“You are doing the works your father did.’ They said to him, ‘We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father--- even God.”** It is not immediately clear whom Jesus is saying is the father of these religious opponents. But they certainly feel attacked.

Some think that the Pharisees are defending themselves against the charge that they are guilty of spiritual adultery, that they are following a false God. I am more inclined to think that they are responding with a countercharge against Jesus. They have heard rumors about the circumstances of Jesus’ birth. There were probably stories that Jesus was born out of wedlock. So who does Jesus think

that He is to raise questions about their paternity! In the end, they are confident that God is their spiritual father.

The evidence from the first century is that these guys were religious. The Pharisees fasted several times a week. They observed the Sabbath. They studied God's law. They observed the feasts. They probably did not run around on their wives. Yet they were plotting to kill Jesus. They were evil.

Psychiatrist Scott Peck quotes a Jewish philosopher by the name of Martin Buber to describe something of the nature of evil. He writes, **"Since the primary motive of the evil is disguise, one of the places evil people are most likely to be found is within the church. What better way to conceal one's evil from oneself, as well as from others, than to be a deacon or some other highly visible form of Christian within our culture. ...evil people tend to gravitate toward piety for the disguise and concealment it can offer them."** (Peck, *People of the Lie*, p. 76-77) If you are around churches and Christian groups long enough, do not be surprised if you encounter someone who truly appears to be evil.

The underlying principle here is that our behavior tends to reflect our paternity. I see quirks in my sons at times that I know that they got from me. I know that I got some of them from my father. The implied criticism in our passage is that the behavior of the Pharisees is not like that of Abraham, or of God. The primary evidence is that they are out to kill Jesus.

Verse 42: **"Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord but he sent me.'"** Jesus specifically denies the claim of the religious leaders that God is their father. If that were true, they would recognize and embrace Jesus, like Abraham did two thousand years earlier. Their true spiritual ancestry is evidenced by their attitude toward this One who has been sent by God.

Many in our culture claim that they believe in God. It is often a vague, undefined understanding of God. It is often a god made in their image. But these people are not so sure about Jesus. The claim here is that Jesus is the true representative of God. That is either true or false. If it is true, then to oppose Him is to oppose God.

Jesus continues in v. 43, **"Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word."** The difficulty is not with intellectual comprehension. It is a problem of the will. Phillips, in his translation, puts it this way: **"You cannot bear to hear what I am really saying."**

If Jesus had been a better communicator, do you think that He would have had a better response? Was He too harsh? Should he have used better evangelism techniques? I don't think so. If He was truly God in the flesh, He was the best communicator around.

In this there is a lesson for the modern church. We teachers and preachers and evangelists need to be clear in our presentation of the gospel, and we should be aware of the social dynamics. But there is a danger that we can think that a lack of response is primarily a problem with our communication. We can be so concerned about the comfort of the seeker that the gospel can be watered down. The ultimate problem is with the will of the hearer. It has to do with one's spiritual ancestry. Our true spiritual status before the God who is there is revealed by our deeds and our relationship with Jesus Christ.

III.

Then in vv. 44-47 we find that SATANIC ANCESTRY IS EVIDENCED BY EVIL ACTIONS AND SPIRITUAL DEAFNESS. (III. SATANIC ANCESTRY IS EVIDENCED BY EVIL...) Jesus tells His opponents in v. 44, **"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."**

This is the first time in the story that the father of the religious leaders is specifically identified. It is the devil. Several years ago a Barna survey found that a majority of American adults who described themselves as Christians agreed with the statement that Satan **"is not a living being but is a symbol of evil."** (2009) Jesus here does not regard the devil as merely a symbol of evil.

The first reference to the devil in the Bible comes in Genesis #3. He appears in the Garden of Eden in the form of a serpent. Instead of going to Adam, he goes to Eve. My suspicion is that he intentionally avoids going to the one who is supposed to be the leader in the relationship. The devil raises with Eve the one prohibition that God has established that the man and the woman are not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (GENESIS 3:4b-5) He says, **"You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."**

There are two lies that Satan tells. The man and the woman will not die, and God is keeping something good from them. They bought them both. They both ate, and death entered into the picture. As a result,

we humans have all inherited a sin nature. By natural birth, the devil is our father. We have his nature. How is it that little ones lie and demand what they want? Do they need to be taught these things?

(EPHESIANS 2:1-2) The Apostle Paul describes our natural spiritual status in Ephesians #2 vv. 1 & 2: **“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience...”** The prince of the power of the air is the devil.

The religious opponents of Jesus by birth and circumcision were sons of Abraham. But their behavior revealed their true spiritual identity. They were plotting to kill Jesus. Their true spiritual father was the devil. (PROJECTOR OFF) They were embracing two lies: God is their father, and Jesus is not from God. Because they believed these two lies and promoted them, they were liars.

Jesus says in v. 45, **“But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.”** Why? Because their father is the devil. They are not spiritually born again. They reflect the nature of the evil one. The problem is one of unbelief. From the divine perspective, they are incapable of understanding the truth about the true God. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 6:44) Back in #6 v. 44, Jesus said, **“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.”** Divine intervention is necessary.

At the same time, we are offered an opportunity, as these first century religious leaders were offered an opportunity. Earlier Jesus addressed Nicodemus, who was a fellow Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. (JOHN 3:16) Jesus explained to him, **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”** Here is the opportunity and responsibility. The offer is still good today. We must simply believe. The object of that belief must be that Jesus was God who became man. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for the sin of humanity. He rose again from the dead on the third day. If we will simply put our trust in this Jesus, the promise of God is that we will not die spiritually. We will have eternal life. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Back in v. 46 of our passage, Jesus says to His opponents, **“Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?”** This is an extraordinary claim. I don't know if there is anyone else in history, who was not mentally ill, who seriously claimed that he or she had never done anything wrong. Here is Jesus' claim to sinlessness. He offers an opportunity for a response. But apparently there is none. Perhaps there was just silence. No one took Him up on the challenge.

This claim of sinlessness was an important theological requirement. Back in #1 v. 29 John the Baptist declared that Jesus was the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The requirement of the Old Testament religious system was that lambs offered for sacrifice had to be without blemish. There could be no observable defect, or else they did not qualify to be used as a sacrifice for sin. In order to qualify to be the sacrifice for the sins of the world, Jesus had to be sinless.

Verse 47: **“Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”** The issue is not a lack of comprehension. It is a refusal to believe the message of Jesus. Jesus’ opponents are spiritually deaf. A commentator by the name of Barclay points out that one who is tone deaf can never fully experience the thrill of music. The one who is color blind can never fully appreciate a beautiful picture. In the same way, one who is spiritually deaf can never fully understand the claims of Jesus.

Most of us here have truly been born again. Because of that, we have God as our spiritual Father. But we still have that sin nature with which we were born. Our original father still calls out to us to follow him.

In *The Crucified King*, Jeremy Treat identifies three ways in which Satan works: deception, temptation, and accusation. First, he whispers lies about everything, but especially about God. God is keeping something good from you. He does not really care about you. He won’t keep His promises. He is not really with you.

Then he also whispers temptations to us. He uses the lusts of the eyes, the lusts of the flesh and the boastful pride of life. He provokes our covetousness. He stokes our dissatisfaction with life. He encourages us to make ourselves the center of the universe. He puts idols in our face.

Then third, the enemy whispers accusations. He covers us with guilt and shame and seeks to convince us that we can never be acceptable to God. As Martin Luther once told a friend, **“When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares that we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus: ‘I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where he is, there I shall be also.’”**

Therein lies our hope and confidence. By virtue of our spiritual rebirth and trust in Jesus Christ, our true spiritual ancestor is the God of the Bible. May our trust in Him be reflected in godly character and behavior.