

September 17 Lesson: Jesus Glorifies God

Fall Quarter 2023: God's Law Is Love

Unit 1: Love Completes; Law Falls Short

Sunday School Lesson for the week of September 17, 2023

By Craig Rikard

Background Scripture: John 7:14-24

Key Verse: John 7:18

Lesson Aims

1. To understand the importance of context in fully understanding the message of the narrative.
2. To relate to those connected in the narrative, and understand them as they relate to our life and times.
3. To learn why Jesus' teaching and preaching was different and powerful.
4. To grasp the importance of God being glorified in all preaching and teaching.
5. To understand the importance of consistency in one's life and witness.

Supplement to Teacher and Student Books

Context

The Feast of Tabernacles

Our narrative occurs around the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast lasted one week and represented the end of the harvest season. It also marked the end of the Jewish year. Thus, one can think of the Feast of Tabernacles as a time to celebrate "endings" in a positive manner. The productive harvest season culminates with this celebration, and the gift of another year of life has been completed. There was also a "forward-looking" element in the celebration. From the past comes the future, both made possible by the same unchangeable God. The Hebrew name for the feast is Sukkot, an observance required in the Torah and one of three festivals in which pilgrims travel to Jerusalem and the Temple. Temporary tents and structures were erected to recall the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness following the Exodus.

Can you name any events in your church that mark completion and celebration of God's goodness? Have you observed a celebration in which it is acknowledged that from the past will come the future? If not, do you think a service of worship that incorporates the meaning of Sukkot would be helpful? Can you offer ideas on how such an observance would be created or observed in a manner that celebrates God's goodness for another year of life, the gifts we have reaped during the year, and how we might use this acknowledgement for our spiritual walk into God's future?

The religious leaders had engaged in attempts to entrap Jesus in a violation of Mosaic Law. Since such attempts failed, some were beginning to contemplate some manner of taking Jesus' life. Though the masses of people flocked to Jesus, especially in Galilee, these were perilous

days for Jesus. In response, Jesus remained in the area of Galilee and avoided the Judean area around Jerusalem, the center of the powerful elite of Judaism. However, the Feast of Tabernacles now presented a problem for Jesus. Again, Sukkot involved a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and visits to the Temple. If he wanted to remain true to the traditions of the Jewish faith he needed to travel to Jerusalem.

Can you relate to Jesus' dilemma? Have there been moments when you were forced to face the unpleasant and upsetting? Does this moment in Jesus' life also teach us that certain difficulties in life cannot be avoided? Can you share an example from your own life that parallels the dilemma facing Jesus?

Jesus' Brothers

From reading John 7 we almost get the impression Jesus' brothers are desiring his end. After all, they encourage, really dare, Jesus to travel to Jerusalem for the feast. It is helpful to walk in their shoes for a moment. Brothers are brothers: sometimes they love and sometimes they are at odds. Jesus' brothers were simply faces among the Jewish masses in Galilee. Their father, Joseph, was a carpenter, and social mobility was not a possibility for them. As with most teens or young adults, they felt what we call "peer pressure." Their brother Jesus was drawing attention to himself by teaching the Law and Prophets at a level greater and deeper than the Pharisees and Rabbis. Whereas the crowds looked upon Jesus in a positive light, the brothers simply existed in the background. Most likely some jealousy seeped into their hearts. Furthermore, even in Galilee, Jesus had his critics. Many criticized this Jewish carpenter who claimed to know what God desired for them. He was, after all, from Nazareth and the son of Joseph and Mary. It might have proved difficult for them to lavish praise upon Jesus, for he was their brother after all. Encouraging him to travel to Jerusalem might expose just how "ordinary" his brothers considered him to be.

Furthermore, they most likely were not aware of the serious plots against Jesus' life. In challenging Jesus to journey to the feast, they were making Jesus "one of them." Perhaps they thought, "If he goes to the Temple he will be put in his place by the educated religious leaders and become another face in the crowd, like them." Still, John offers us the reason they encouraged Jesus to attend the feast. They didn't believe in him! Imagine, you are one of the Jewish masses, and your brother is claiming to have a special relationship with God! People are calling your brother Rabbi! Some are even asking if Jesus is the Messiah? His brothers almost certainly loved him; they just struggled with the very idea he was the Messiah.

James, the Lord's brother, is a good example of the dynamic between Jesus and his brothers. Just because they were laborers did not mean they were not devout or pious. James was extremely pious. Tradition claims he was called "James the camel kneed" because his knees were so worn from praying. James refused to believe in Jesus as Messiah; that is, until the resurrection. Following the resurrection James became a believer and devout follower of Jesus, even dying for his faith. James' conversion serves as a powerful proclamation of Jesus being Messiah. What would make pious James believe his own brother was the Son of God? The reality of the resurrection was true, or James would never have believed in him.

Can you relate to Jesus' brothers' hesitation in believing in Jesus? Even though they were not believers at the time, can we perceive them with compassion? Knowing family dynamics as we do, is the behavior of his brothers understandable? Can you discuss how familiarity with a person can make it more difficult to believe in them as a spiritual person or leader? The difficulty his brothers faced in believing in Jesus was their own perception of him. He was their brother, with the same parents from the same village. We are all tempted to "see Jesus as we need to see him." Faith is a journey of learning exactly who Jesus is and what he wills for us. Can you share from your own experience the struggle to step outside your perception of Jesus and be open to the Spirit's illumination?

Jesus Travels to Jerusalem

Jesus waited for his brothers to leave for their pilgrimage, leaving them to believe he was remaining behind. Consequently, Jesus arrives half-way through the Sukkot. He wasted no time in traveling to the Temple in order to proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom. Jesus refused to soften his preaching out of fear. His words still stunned, amazed, and caused the heart to burn.

Do you think most would soften their message in "dangerous territory"? Do you think Jesus was "tempting fate"? Or, do you believe the message and Jesus were so intertwined it was impossible for him to speak anything other than the truth that dwelled within him? Jesus preached the good news and was the good news! What does Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the Temple reveal concerning his trust in the Father? What does Jesus' appearance reveal about the timing of God? If it was not time for him to be arrested and die, he did not need to fear. Can you share together your reflections on the fine line between being bold and being rash? How do you think we can best discern when we should be bold and when we should be reserved? How do you think we can best understand and trust God's timing in life?

Walk Through the Narrative

What Was So Different About Jesus Teaching?

We are familiar with biblical texts that state the hearts of people burned within them when Jesus spoke. One great example occurs in the post-resurrection Emmaus Road story. The two men on the road realized Jesus was with them because their hearts burned within them. Still, it is obvious that Jesus' preaching and teaching was centered on the Mosaic Law and its requirements. In other words, he was using the same passages and source of written truth as the pharisees and Rabbis. He used terms, phrases, stories, and parables that his listeners could understand. They may not have initially understood his interpretation of the Law, but they could relate to Law. The people heard lessons from Rabbis and religious leaders in synagogue and the Temple. The religious life and everyday life of the Jewish people were strongly intertwined. How one lived, what one did, or what one said all related to their understanding of Mosaic Law.

Therefore, what made Jesus' teaching different? First, there was a powerful connection between Jesus as a person and the message itself. His teachings emerged not just from scrolls; they arose from his heart. People recognize authenticity. The pastors who speak most profoundly to me are authentic. Their message is rooted in Scripture but is also a part of them. It is obvious they "mean what they say." Jesus meant what he said, and it was obvious. Jesus said, "My teaching is

not my own. It comes from the one who sent me.” Notice he did not say, “It comes from the Torah, or Law of Moses.” Jesus’ message was from God, and he was the incarnation of God. There are moments when our human words and language fail us. After all, we are speaking of the eternal with human language. Jesus and his message were who he was and speaking it was so genuine. That is the best my human understanding can do. Still, it was his intimate connection with the good news that drew people, captured their ears, and caused their hearts to burn. Though they had listened to numerous lessons during their years, this message was uniquely different and powerful because of the messenger! Though they struggled to understand fully, they were interested in following Jesus to hear more.

The most unique difference in Jesus’ teaching of the Law was his emphasis and proper interpretation of the Shema, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, soul, mind and strength, and thy neighbor as thyself.” For the pharisees and Rabbis, one needed to obey the Law to please God. It was one’s knowledge of and obedience to the Law that mattered. Jesus “personalized” the Law. The Law was not an independent reality that existed on scrolls and through the teaching of Rabbis and pharisees. The Law was known and experienced in human relationships! For example, I do not commit adultery just because it violates the Law of God; I also do not commit adultery because I love my spouse and would never hurt her. I do not steal just to keep the Law; I do not steal because it hurts my brother and sister. The Mosaic Law has always pointed to a higher Law. Both are inspired gifts from God. It was this personification of the Law that drew the crowd. When Jesus personified the Law through the Shema, the masses listened because in his teaching they mattered! How they were treated mattered! They too could obey the Law by loving their neighbor as God loves them. Most importantly, Jesus claimed God loved them as they were and longed to lead them in greater depths of life.

Finally, Jesus was emphatic that people understand the message he spoke was from God. They could not yet understand he was Messiah and the incarnation of God. That understanding would come in time. Until then, Jesus was emphatic they know his teaching was eternal in nature. At this time, most perceived Jesus as an enlightened, powerful Rabbi. Jesus was emphatic that they not worship the “carpenter from Nazareth” (prior to knowing he was Messiah) but rather God. God is truth, and all truth is a gift from God. Jesus was emphatic in ensuring his listeners understood no person can lay claim to creating and owning truth. The man or woman can become a vessel, but the truth is from God. When this distinction is not recognized serious consequences follow. In most of our lifetime we have witnessed those who allowed this distinction to blur. People began to identify truth with the messenger, and the pride of the messenger too often enjoyed such power and notoriety. Jesus would later reveal he is Messiah, and he and the Father are one. Consequently, to hear Jesus teach was a unique, powerful, mystical, and spiritual experience.

Are you drawn to authenticity when you hear the proclamation of the Word? How do you discern when a person is authentic? How do you discern truth from an authentic person in contrast to those who seem somewhat “disconnected” from their message? Do you think it is important to recognize whether the “disconnect” is from immaturity and lack of experience? Still, authenticity is an intangible experienced over time. Can you share why you are drawn to certain preachers and teachers and why? How do you discern whether the teacher/preacher is emphatic that his listeners know he is only the messenger, and God

is the truth? How do we tell if a person is glorifying themselves or God? How do you think you can live a more authentic life? Since our life in Christ is a message, do we not think we should live and share that message in an authentic manner?

Doing the Will of God Reveals the Source of the Message

Jesus claimed that when a person chooses to do the will of God they will discover truth. God's truth is always consistent with God's will. If one attempts to proclaim God's truth and good news, and their actions stand in contrast, they will eventually be exposed. The disconnect between them and their message will become apparent. We know the will of God is to love one another as God has loved us in Christ. If I live in God's will, my relationship with my teaching and message will become more intimate and obvious. Naturally, the opposite is true.

A major inconsistency existed in the lives of many pharisees and Rabbis. They eloquently or fluently spoke of God's will revealed in the Torah. However, their suppression of the masses and negligence of the needy such as widows and orphans placed their life in disharmony with truth. It should not be a great mystery that people did not relate well to the religious leaders of their day. Jesus answered the accusation from his critics that he was not from God, but rather the devil by pointing out the inconsistency in their own life. Jesus pointed out that they were keeping the ritual of circumcision because it was in their tradition. Notice, Jesus made a clear distinction between employing tradition alone as the source of truth in contrast of realizing God alone is truth and the foundation of all truth. However, they were willing to take Jesus' life when he spoke not from tradition but from God. And they would do so in good conscience because they would have considered themselves obedient to the Law. They highly valued performing circumcisions on the Sabbath while condemning Jesus for healing on the same day. Furthermore, Jesus pointed out they were all guilty of not keeping the Law. No man or woman kept the Law perfectly. Yet, they condemned Jesus for doing something good. Jesus' life and teaching stood in sharp contrast. Every facet of his life was consistent with what he taught. Using a phrase from Paul, his "yeas were yeas and his nays, nays." This consistency would continue to reveal the source of Jesus' truth and, eventually, who he was.

In the Christian life we begin with the redeeming truth that we are loved and forgiven by God, revealed in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. However, our life does not become a passive existence whereby we feel no need for further enlightenment. We must also be very careful of reading Scripture in isolation, arriving at our own conclusion outside the community of faith and experiences of life. What should be our first steps in this remarkable journey? We should choose to love as God loves. This is the will of God. As we journey with Christ, being empowered by the Spirit to love others, we become more intimate with the Lord and truth. Of course, there are errors and failure along the way. Still, through God's forgiveness we always continue the walk. As a clergyperson, I can honestly say that I learned of God's truth through great teachers and in a community of great Christians. However, my greatest enlightenment has come from my choices to love as Jesus loves. Every moment becomes a teachable moment. Every conversation with another can become a moment of enlightenment.

Can you identify the dangers of reaching conclusions about God and truth in isolation? Do you believe there is danger present when a community believes they alone know the truth? How do you think walking in the will of God, the Shema, clarifies truth and more deeply

enlightens? Do you think it is better to confront those who are in error, or live inconsistently, or to live consistently ourselves in the will of God? Which do you think is the most effective witness? Can you share your thoughts on the question? Some may consider both necessary. Engage in a healthy discussion of the most effective means of sharing the message of redemption through Jesus in our life.

Prayer

Almighty God, give us hearts that seek Jesus. Give us wisdom in avoiding casting Jesus in our own light and image. Empower us to walk in the purity of your love that we might see God in life and others. In Jesus name, Amen.