

John 5:16-47 - Conflict and Clarification¹

Before the lesson – Print the handout, “Three Reasons not to Follow Jesus” for the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship Question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

What is the most recent family role you have taken on? (I am now a grandparent, an aunt, etc.)

Who has been a “broker” for you - helping you gain access to education, food, shelter, or other resources?

Information

Jesus has just performed two miracles, both healings. He healed the son of a nobleman from 20 miles away. He healed a man who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years. Jesus’ acts proved that he was the master over distance and time. That Jesus had power was undeniable. What concerned the religious leaders was, what is the source of this power, and who granted Jesus the authority to use such powers? In other words, who does this man think he is?

Before we get into Jesus’ answer to that question, let’s hear the backstory again. Jesus has just healed the paralytic man - but he healed the man on the wrong day. It was the Sabbath. No work was to be done on the Sabbath.

The man who was healed was not congratulated by the Pharisees, but condemned by them, because he, too, was working on the Sabbath since he was carrying his mat.

- Have a class member read John 5:14-18.

“My Father has been working until now, and I am still working.”

Why would that statement make the religious leaders furious?

What we (and the Synoptic Gospels) call “miracles,” Jesus (in the Gospel of John) calls “works.” John has seven “signs” or works that point to Jesus’ power and identity. So far, we have looked at three of them: turning water into wine, healing a child, and healing a man. In our next lesson, we will look at the fourth sign, feeding the over-5000. Seventeen times in John’s Gospel, Jesus calls these “works.”

- Have class members read John 14:10 and 17:4.

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“By the use of the term ‘works’ for his miracles Jesus was associating his ministry with creation and the salvific works of his Father in the past: ‘My Father is at work even until now, and so I am at work, too.’ So close is the union of Jesus and the Father in the works of the ministry that the Father Himself may be said to perform Jesus’ works (14:10). The concept of ‘work’ in John is wider than that of miracles; in 17:4 Jesus can sum up his whole ministry as a work. Not only are Jesus’ miracles works, his words are works, too. ‘The words that I say to you are not spoken on my own; it is the Father, abiding in me, who performs the works.’ (14:10). That words and works are companions in John may be seen from the Johannine custom of having a miraculous work followed by an interpretive discourse.”²

The next passage is a bit difficult to follow unless we understand the Roman and Mediterranean culture that Jesus was addressing. In this culture, honor was the most important possession. Status was the key to receiving honor.

Your birth family and your gender and your birth order determined how much honor and status you were due for the rest of your life. If you were in a lower order of status (as most people were), it was necessary to have a patron who could provide for you whether that be a job or house or even a village. To gain these benefits, you could not go to the patron himself. He was too high in society for you to be in his presence. What you needed was a “broker,” someone who was a friend of the patron and who also knew you and your situation. This broker acted as a mediator between you and your patron. The broker would speak to the patron, then the patron would send the broker back with a message of support as well as resources.³

“Patronage language is astonishingly common in the Gospel of John. Forty-three times in John we are told that Jesus was ‘sent’ by God, language that appears only twice in Matthew, once in Mark, four times in Luke, and once in Paul.”⁴

Jesus is using patronage language in his response to the Pharisees’ comments. Listen for the word, “sent.” (verses 23, 24, 30. Also, in the next reading, verses 36, 37, 38.)

- Have a class member read John 5:19-30.

“This is a classic statement of Jesus’ brokerage. The broker does not have the resources; the patron does. It is God the patron who raises the dead and gives them life. But the broker acts as a surrogate patron and does nothing on his own (reiterated in 5:30). Trusting a broker is a matter of trusting that this surrogate relationship is in place....[B]rokers are never equal to the patrons they

² Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John*. The Anchor Bible, Volume 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 527.

³ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 117-119.

⁴ Malina, 118.

serve...[A] father always has greater honor than a son. By acknowledging this, Jesus shows himself to be loyal to his Father.”⁵

One Biblical scholar believes he has found a “hidden parable” in this passage.

“The [hidden] parable that [New Testament scholar] Dodd finds in John could be set in an apprentice shop where a youth is learning a trade...the apprentice must do what the master does; and whatever he does, the apprentice does likewise. In a simple society like that of Palestine, a trade would be taught within a family, and the son would have to imitate his father’s work. Jesus was known as a carpenter’s son (Matthew 13:55) and as a carpenter (Mark 6:3).”⁶

“Jesus...is not a rebellious son setting himself up as a rival to the Father; rather, he is completely dependent on the Father and claims nothing on his own. That Jesus does none of his works on his own reflects a favorite theme in John...[A] Johannine passage like verse 19 led Christian theologians to an understanding that the Father and the Son possess one nature, one principle of operation.”⁷

Verse 26 - “Here the emphasis is on free divine self-giving: this is a self that is utterly shared in love. The living God shares what most essentially characterizes God’s very self: life and love...But that ‘what’ of the divine self can be fully expressed only in a ‘who,’ the self of the Son. That is at the heart of Christian monotheism... This unique unity does not erase distinctiveness: The Father and the Son are different yet inseparably one.”⁸

“Here is a new idea: ‘The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son.’ God is still judge but is united in agency with Jesus. *So judgment is now defined by who Jesus is.* This judge is one who heals the lame man, but also warns him not to sin...[A]t the heart of judgment is love...The critical issue is whether people will be drawn, whether the love will be returned, whether there will be listening and trust that are essential to a mutual relationship.”⁹

Jesus continues to defend himself and his ministry in this next passage. Listen for two things: First, the emphatic insistence of Jesus that he was “sent” by God (brokerage language: verses 36, 37, 38). Second, the insistence of Jesus that there are many witnesses that prove his claim to have been sent by God is true.

⁵ Malina, 116.

⁶ Brown, 218. Referring to C.H. Dodd, “A Hidden Parable in the Fourth Gospel,” *More New Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 30-40.

⁷ Brown, 218.

⁸ David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 131.

⁹ Ford, 132.

- Have a class member read John 5:31-47.

What or who are the witnesses Jesus points to?

Depending on the scholar, commentaries list from three to seven witnesses, but most agree on these four: 1. John the Baptist 2. Jesus' miracles 3. The Father 4. The Scriptures.

The point is not the number of witnesses, but that there are witnesses to back Jesus' claim.

“Jewish law required more than one witness in support of a claim for it to be valid, and here Jesus goes along with that: ‘If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true.’.... Yet none of these can provide conclusive proof that wraps up the case decisively.”¹⁰

The rejection of Jesus was not a rational rejection. The Pharisees had been given plenty of evidence from plenty of sources that demonstrated that Jesus was who he claimed to be. What does this tell us about the role of rationality versus faith in our spiritual lives?

Jesus has a defensive posture, but he is also eager to make the offensive move in the “court.”

Jesus has made his case. Why can't he win over the Pharisees?

Transformational Exercise

Two thousand years later, it is easy for us to judge the Pharisees. Yet, we must confess that we ourselves do not always live as if we believe in Jesus and in what Jesus taught. What prevents us from believing and following Jesus?

[Distribute the handout, “Three Reasons not to Follow Jesus.”]

Reasons given for the Pharisees are itemized below. Some of these may be ours as well. As you read these three paragraphs, consider your own personal barriers to following Jesus more fully.

Pride: “Disbelief in face of these witnesses must be motivated by pride; it is a deliberate disbelief...If it were an intellectual problem, it could be met by explanation: but it is really a problem of the moral orientation of life and of the love of God, and so it is met with prophetic accusation...The failure to accept Jesus is really the preference of the self.”¹¹

¹⁰ Ford, 136.

¹¹ Brown, 228.

Heritage: This is not “what we’ve always believed.” “They justify their refusal to believe in Jesus in the name of their loyalty to Moses., and yet Moses will condemn them for this failure to believe. In Jewish thought, Moses was to intercede before God for Jews; now he will become their prosecutor.”¹²

Self-centeredness: “Three linked accusations... This amounts to a diagnosis of pathological honoring. Its priority is not loving God; it fails to honor Jesus; and its dominant desire is for honor from other people, not from God.... There is a challenge to readers to examine ourselves about our dominant desires and practices of honoring, and about what and whom we rely on for our sense of our own worth, dignity, significance and purpose.”¹³

In any conflict, we have a choice we must make. Even the decision to remain neutral or unconcerned is a choice. Jesus is pushing the Pharisees (and other observers) to make the choice to believe who Jesus says he is or to believe that Jesus is not who he says he is. Of course, that choice will have immediate and radical consequences.

“The present passage is illuminated by reading it in terms of Rudolf Bultmann’s ‘dualism of decision.’ If response to the Gospel had been either predetermined or inevitable, it would have been pointless to write it. The Gospel in fact is an appeal to readers to respond by deciding to believe in Jesus. The repeated ‘anyone’ in this passage underlines that the decision can go either way... Each reader who ‘hears my word’ (logos) is faced with a decision about whether or not to trust this word - and its speaker.”¹⁴

What barriers to following Jesus more fully do you face?

What would happen if you confessed those barriers to God in an honest prayer?

[Close in a prayer something like this:] *Lord, give us the faith we need to trust in you and to follow you. Be patient with us in our fears and doubts as we come to know you and love you. Help us to be a witness of your wisdom and compassion. Amen.*

¹² Brown, 229.

¹³ Ford, 139.

¹⁴ Ford, 133.

Three Reasons not to Follow Jesus

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¹⁶ Brown, 229.

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