The Gospel of John: Did Jesus Claim to be God?
John 5:16-30

As we continue through the Gospel of John, we come to one of the meatiest, most profound passages in all the four gospels where Jesus speaks to His identity and His relationship with God the Father. Please stand and let us read John 5:16-30.

16 And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. 17 But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”

18 This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

19 So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.

20 For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel.

21 For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.

22 For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.

23 “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

25 “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. 26 For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.

27 And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.

28 Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

30 “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

I have a friend whom I love and respect, but we disagree on a major doctrine of Christianity. My friend, who is quite an intellectual in his own right, contends that Jesus never claimed to be divine. He believes that historical Christianity has distorted what Jesus actually said about Himself; thus, he sees Jesus as God’s messenger, one of God’s children (like the rest of us), and the premier example for how we are to live. He denies that Jesus is anything other than a man; he denies that Jesus’ death on a cross atones for our sin; or that faith in Jesus is somehow required in order for us to escape judgement. My friend is begging an important question, so I’ve entitled my message, Did Jesus Claim to be God? It is a good question, a commonly asked question, and the text we are looking at today speaks to the question. My message, then, will fall under five subheadings: 1) the Jew’s Legitimate Concerns; 2) The Son’s Unique Relationship with the Father; 3) The Divine Prerogatives of the Son; 4) The Eternal Life Now; and 5) Our Necessary Response.

I. The Jew’s Legitimate Concerns

If you recall, last week we observed that Jesus supernaturally healed a man bound 38 years to his bed. He then ordered the man to get up, take up his bed, and walk. Given that it was the Sabbath, some Jewish authorities approach the healed man and question why he is breaking the Sabbath by carrying his bed, and the man replies, “The man who healed me, that man told me to take up my bed and walk.” Later on that day the healed man identifies Jesus as the one who had healed him, and John reports, 16 And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. Clearly the first concern of the Jewish authorities was that Jesus was a Sabbath breaker, and He was commanding others to break the Sabbath as well.
Now, it is very easy for us as Protestant Christians to roll our eyes at the Jewish authorities here in John 5 who seem to be obsessed with observing the Sabbath laws. To appreciate their concerns, we need to appreciate the historical context.

First of all, we must remember the law of Moses…the Ten Commandments…which served as the very foundation of the Jewish faith. The fourth commandment is given to Moses in Exodus 20:8-11: 8 “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

As one of the Ten Commandments, the Jews equated honoring the Sabbath with the laws forbidding idolatry, murder, or adultery. They remembered Numbers 15 when God ordered a man who had been gathering sticks on the Sabbath to be stoned to death. It is no wonder, then, that the Jews were very careful to honor the Sabbath. Not only did they not wish to offend God, Sabbath traditions were also central to the Jewish identity as God’s people who lived under the rule of pagan emperors. In other words, when they were under the rule of the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and now the Romans, the Jewish people were consistently set apart by their careful observance of the Sabbath; thus, Sabbath observance was not just a religious conviction, it was part of their national identity. It is for these reasons that the Jewish rabbis had parsed out 39 definitions of “work” that needed to be avoided (with numerous finer points of commentary), and the last on the list was carrying any burden from one place to another on the Sabbath. The punishment for breaking the Sabbath was death by stoning.

We should understand that the Jewish authorities were not nearly as pedantic and legalistic as we make them out to be. They literally believed that God’s favor upon their country was directly related to their obedience or disobedience to God’s law. They interpreted their sad history of occupation by pagan rulers to be the result of their disobedience, so each person’s obedience to God’s law was the apparent path toward liberating their country and once again inheriting the land that God had promised to them.

If you think about it, many evangelical Christians hold the very same convictions about the plight of our country. Untold numbers of authors have published “prophetic” books that equate the “judgment of God” upon our increasingly secular and disobedient generation. Should China or Russia invade the United States this year and completely conquer our country, we can be quite certain that the most religious in our midst would interpret that outcome as God’s judgment upon an unfaithful and decadent generation. This same mindset was entrenched amongst the Jews after hundreds of years of foreign occupation, so the desperation to “get it right” was at an all-time high. Thus, when the Jews see this man carrying his bed on the Sabbath, his sin is not only an offense to God, but also a sin against the Jewish nation and their hopes for liberation.

When the Jewish authorities express their concerns to Jesus, He responds in vs. 17, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.” As I researched this passage, it became obvious to me that most Jews would have agreed with Jesus in this respect: “God is still working until now.” In other words, there was an understanding amongst the Jews that although God “rested on the seventh day from His work of creation,” God didn’t need the rest, nor did God stop working.
altogether. The Jews understood that God “rested on the seventh day” as an example for humankind to follow, because human beings actually need rest. As Jesus says in Mark 2:27: The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. In other words, human beings need to set apart a “holy-day” to worship, to rest, and to remember all the goodness of God as revealed in His creation. The Jews understood that humans needed a Sabbath, but that God kept working all the time...even on Sabbath days. People were born on Sabbath days, the sun still shone on the Sabbath days, the rains still fell on the Sabbath days, and God was still in the business of redeeming the world on Sabbath days. For Jesus to say, “God is still working until now…” was not at all offensive. But that’s not what Jesus said. He actually said, “My Father is still working until now…”

Nobody in the ancient Jewish world referred to God as “my Father.” We might find obscure references to God as “The Father;” Jesus will instruct His disciples to pray “Our Father;” but only Jesus had the audacity to speak of God as “My Father,” and the Jews were legitimately concerned that this mere man should have the arrogance to refer to the Almighty with such casual familiarity. It wreaked of blasphemy.

Even more offensive was the second part of His response: “My Father is still working until now, and I am working.” Jesus so aligns Himself with the Father as to say that because HIS Father is still working, Jesus Himself is also working. As does the Father, so does the Son.

John reports that the Jews interpreted Jesus to be claiming equality with God…and that, of course, was blasphemy in the highest order. In vs. 18 John reports: “This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”

Now...did Jesus claim equality with God? Did Jesus claim to be God? All early indicators would suggest that is what the Jewish authorities heard, right? Most historians would agree that Jesus was crucified specifically because of these particular statements. People understood Him to say that He was the Son of God, and that He was one with the Father. What follows next in vss. 19-30 is Jesus defending His position and clarifying His relationship with the Father. That leads me to my second subheading:

II. The Son’s Unique Relationship with the Father

Now, before we hear what Jesus has to say in His defense of these accusations, we must first understand one more bit of historical context. In the ancient Jewish mindset, a son who was unwilling to submit to his father was seen as one who saw himself as his father’s equal.

Imagine if you will a father who owns a construction company. He raises his son to learn everything there is to know about the construction industry; but then one day, the son decides to leave and begin his own construction company. Now the father and the son are “equals.” They both have their own companies. They compete against each other in the marketplace, and the son is no longer dependent upon the father for his success or his knowledge…the son thinks of himself as equal to (if not greater than) his father.

When the Jews accused Jesus as claiming “equality with God,” this is the picture that came into their minds. Equality meant “independent of…” So, with that context in mind, let us consider
how Jesus responds, beginning with vs. 19: Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own 
accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the 
Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.

So, what did you hear? Did Jesus claim “equality” with God the Father? No…at least not in the 
sense that the Jewish people would have assumed. Jesus in no way claims independence or 
equal standing with the Father. On the contrary, Jesus clearly presents Himself as the Son who is 
completely submissive to and dependent upon the Father. So how is it that Jesus is empowered to do what God does? Love. God so loves the Son that He shows the son all that He Himself is doing. Love also accounts for why the Son does only that which the Father shows him, right?

The unique and defining quality in this relationship between Father and Son is LOVE. The 
Father so loves the Son He reveals all that He is doing; the Son so loves the Father that He does 
what the Father shows Him.

Now, in case you think this concept of Jesus’ relationship with the Father is unique to John’s 
interpretation, let us recall the early Christian hymn as we find it 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, but emptied himself…and being found in human form, he humbled 
himself by becoming obedient…”

So…is Jesus equal to God the Father? If Jesus does what the Father does…if Jesus sees what the 
Father does and has the divine understanding to comprehend what no mere mortal could possibly 
comprehend…if Jesus has the power and the authority to do what the Father does…can we say 
that Jesus is equal with the Father…that Jesus is God even as the Father is God?

I don’t think we are yet able to answer that question fully; but here’s what we could say based on 
what we have learned so far: if Jesus is equal with the Father, His equality would come through 
complete subordination to the Father. As Jesus will say again in vs. 30, “I can do nothing on my 
own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of 
him who sent me.” Whatever “equality” Jesus may enjoy is a product of his submission and 
subordination to the Father. The picture here is that Jesus so readily and perfectly submits to the 
Father…He so perfectly executes what the Father show Him, that that Jesus will later say in John 
14:9, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

Now equality through subordination may seem contradictory, but consider what one theologian 
wrote some time ago: “If the Father gave everything to the Son, then the Father is superior to the Son; but if the 
Father gave everything to his Son, then the Son is equal to the Father.”

This captures our Lord’s relationship with the Father. He is completely submissive and 
subordinate to the Father out of love, and the Father has shown the Son all things out of love. 
Clearly the relationship between Jesus and the Father is unique. Jesus is not “a” son; He is THE 
Son of THE Father. Only the Son is shown what the Father is doing; and only the God/Man Son 
could possibly comprehend the immortal wisdom of God almighty. We may say a great many 
things about Jesus, but He clearly did not see Himself as just an ordinary man who was living a 
great life that all ordinary men could lead if only they were as faithful to God as He was. That 
which the Father revealed to the Son was greater than that which the Father revealed to other
men. However, because of Jesus the Son, and through the power of His Holy Spirit, those who are later forgiven and reconciled to the Father through the Son “will do even greater things!” That is a sermon for another day.

Now…why is the Father showing everything to the Son? Jesus says, “And greater works than these (healing the paralytic) will he show him, so that YOU may marvel.” According to Jesus, the Father has sent the Son into the world, showing the Son all that the Father is doing, so that all people would MARVEL…so that all people would look to the Son with wonder.

Let me take a time out for just a second. This man Jesus, the Jewish peasant carpenter from Nazareth, said these words early in the first century while standing in a very small, insignificant suburb of the great Roman Empire. There were likely very few people standing by who heard it, none of them of any importance as far as we know. One of His followers, a fisherman, thought this claim to be so profound that he wrote it down on a piece of parchment. However, others who heard it were so offended that they would not rest until they saw him nailed to a tree just months after the words were spoken. It is now nearly 2000 years later. Billions upon billions of people have lived and died since these words were spoken by the carpenter king. Billions and billions of words have been written by untold numbers of philosophers, poets, kings, presidents, and basement trolls. But let me ask you a question: has there ever been a single person in history before or since who has caused the whole world to marvel as this man Jesus? Were we to add up all the words written about Him, all the portraits painted of Him, all the music composed for Him, all the buildings dedicated to Him, all the universities established for Him, all the acts of mercy devoted to him, all the dollars given in His name, all the glory attributed to Him from those who claimed to have been saved by Him, all the honor associated with His name and His movement in every corner of the globe…is there even a close second? Friends, if it was the Father’s will to send the Son, that all the world would MARVEL at Him…may we agree that that Father was quite successful in that regard? I will come back to this point in just a minute, but let us now consider:

III. The Divine Prerogatives of the Son

Already Jesus has demonstrated powerful works in John’s Gospel. Jesus moved the heart of a broken, Samaritan woman that literally transformed her whole life in a matter of minutes. Jesus healed a Roman official’s son with His kingly command. And now Jesus has healed a man reduced to a mat for 38 years. Yet, says Jesus, “greater things are yet to come.” What are those greater works that Jesus will demonstrate as the Son of the Father? Jesus describes His divine prerogatives in vss. 21-22: 21 For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. 22 For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son…"

NT scholar Frederick Dale Bruner writes: Two realities were confessed with feeling in the Jewish monotheistic faith: (a) That only God gives life at the beginning and (b) that only God gives judgment at the end. Here in vss. 21 and 22, Jesus is claiming the divine prerogatives to do those things that only God can do. Jesus speaks to each prerogative later in His speech, so let us first look to what he says about “giving life to whom He will.” Look at what Jesus says beginning with vs. 25: 25 “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. 26 For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.
Jesus makes two claims about Himself here that no mere mortal would every make in his right mind. First, Jesus claims to have the authority to wake the dead. Not only will the dead hear his voice at the end of the age and rise, but already Jesus has that authority. Jesus gave life to the official’s son who was on the verge of death. Jesus breathed life into the broken heart of a Samaritan woman. Jesus gave new life to a cripple of 38 years. Jesus will literally call Lazarus out of the grave in John 11. How does Jesus wield such power? He is the Son of God the Father, and according to Jesus “…as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.”

Life does not exist apart from God. Our secular culture would love for our children to believe that “life” can accidentally happen given enough time and chance…but that is the most nonsensical and non-scientific assertion ever stated. We have no evidence or cause to believe that life ever happens by accident. Life produces life. Life can only be given by the One who has LIFE in Himself. All life is dependent upon the Uncreated One, who has Life in Himself.

And here is what Jesus just said: “He (the Father) has granted the Son also to have life in himself.” If ever there was a clear claim to divine power and nature, this is it. This claim deeply informed John’s prologue in John 1 when he writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.”

Many people, my good friend included, have submitted that Jesus never claimed to be God, or divine, or equal with God. But friends, that is clearly what John the Apostle heard…that is clear from the prologue, and it is also clear from what we read here in John 5…words spoken by Jesus himself. If Jesus has life in Himself, then Jesus is God; however, Jesus is NOT the Father. Jesus is completely subordinate to the Father; but He is, in power and authority, now equal with the Father to the extent that He does those things that only God the Father can do.

Let us now look to how Jesus describes His prerogative regarding judgment. Look to vss. 27-29: 27 And he [the Father] has given him [the Son] authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. 28 Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice 29 and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

According to Jesus, the Father has given the Son authority to execute judgment. Why? Because the Son of God is also the Son of Man! Jesus tells the Jews NOT to marvel at this declaration because, if they believe God’s Word, this should be obvious to them! The Son of Man was promised to the Jews in Daniel 7:13-14: I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. 14 And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Jesus clearly identifies Himself as the promised Son of Man…the Messiah…the Christ, the One to whom is given dominion and glory and a kingdom. And as the King of Kings, Jesus will judge. Jesus will call all the world…all the living and the dead…and all will stand before His judgments. And the judgments will be based upon our lives lived on earth: those who have done good will be ushered into the resurrection life; and those who have done evil will be ushered into the resurrection of the judgment.
Another great lie of our age is that when we die, we cease to exist, and that’s it. There is no justice that awaits us; there is no heaven and no hell…just peace and quiet with no sense of knowing, remembering, or consciousness. This lie is dependent upon the first lie…that life accidentally created itself over billions of years by time and chance. If life is ultimately accidental and without a Source, then life is completely over when we breathe our last.

However, if life is not accidental…if life was given by the One who has life in Himself; then it stands to reason that we will be held accountable for what we did with the life that was entrusted to us, right?

Friends, pay attention to the One who has caused all generations to marvel. Here is what He just said: all people…all people…will be wakened! No one remains dead…all are resurrected. Our existence will go on. But not all people will go on to heaven…to the resurrection of Life. Those who have done evil will be resurrected, but their resurrection will be that of judgment. This is the default truth for all human souls, and it is a certainty. What is the default criteria that determines the destiny of our souls? It is what we have done in this life. Those who have done good go to the resurrection of Life. What does it mean to do good? In Matthew 25 that looks like those who showed mercy to the destitute and lonely. In the beatitudes it looks like the meek, the mourning, and those who are peacemakers; those persecuted for the sake of Jesus’ name. In the Sermon on the Mount, doing good looks like being of such pure mind and heart that we harbor no anger against another, and we entertain no lustful desires for those we are not married to. How are you feeling about that? Jesus says humans will all be judged for what we have done…this life matters, and we are accountable. Does this bother you? It bothers me. If I will be judged for what I have done, I’m nervous. I have done some good to be sure. But I have also done evil. I have no doubt that the judgments of the King will be fair and just…but that’s what concerns me the most. If I get what I deserve…knowing my heart, my attitudes, my motives, and my secrets…I suspect that doesn’t end well. What about you? If this was all Jesus said, we could hardly call this good news. But that is not all that He said. Let us consider

**IV. The Eternal Life Now**

Right in the heart of his comments to the Jewish authorities, Jesus embeds a hope that we must meditate on with our whole hearts. Here is what He says, beginning again with vs. 21:

21 For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. 22 For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, 23 that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. 24 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

As I mentioned earlier, my friend believes that Jesus came to teach how to live the best life now, but that He was not at all concerned with the life to come. I think that is inaccurate based upon what Jesus just said. Judgment is coming for us all. Our lives now matter a ton, that is true, in fact…they matter so much it is horrifying to think about! Who among us is “good enough” to merit heaven? Should we be judged upon the merits of our lives now, I suspect we are all without hope. But listen to what Jesus says: The Son has been given all authority to give life to whom he will. All the judgment has been handed over to the Son. All the honor is due the Son, just as honor is due to the Father--even to the degree that dishonoring the Son is equivalent to dishonoring the Father. Now…why is any of this true? Why would the Father give all
authority to the Son to judge and to give life? Is it not because the Son took on flesh and dwelt among us? Is it not because the Lion became the Lamb to take away the sins of the world? Is it not because He who knew no sin became sin that He might impute to us His right standing with the Father?

Can you see it, church? Jesus isn’t bragging about Himself or His superpowers; He is presenting the hope of the Gospel. Because Jesus has been completely obedient to the Father, submissive even to death on a cross…and because Jesus will bear our penalty that satisfies God’s justice…because Jesus will endure the Father turning His face away…and because Jesus will conquer death and be raised up on the third day…Jesus will be highly exalted! “Therefore, God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus [the Son], every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ [the Son] is Lord, to the glory of God the Father!”

Jesus has earned our salvation! The authority is His; the judgment is His; who receives Life is up to Him…now, we who are perishing must simply believe HIM. Jesus proclaims: “Truly I say to you without contradiction, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life.” In Jesus we receive the eternal life now, and we pass from death to life…there is no more judgment, no condemnation, we are His beloved, and we will be with the Father and the Son for all eternity. Thanks be to God! I must close now with my final subheading...

V. Our Necessary Response

The claims of Jesus cannot be ignored by anyone. But we must be clear about what those claims are. Jesus was not just a good man: He was the one and only Son of God who purchased our salvation through his obedience to the Father…obedience that put the blameless Lamb of God on a Roman cross that we deserve. All of us will stand before King Jesus, and we will be held accountable. But here’s the good news: if we have called upon His name in faith, relying upon His finished work on the cross to save us, we will not be judged according to what we have done—we will be judged according to what He has done! That is the Gospel; it is good news; but it demands a response. Believe and be saved. Believe and inherit the eternal life now…a life that will change everything…a life that is not going to be easy, but it will be good! A life that will be a blessing to this world in His name…a life that will endure to the end and be welcomed into the heavenly city. Believe…and inherit the eternal life now…Or don’t believe. That is your right and your option. But make no mistake: your rejection of Jesus is the equivalent of rejecting the Father, the Maker of heaven and earth. Your rebellion will be judged, as will your life on earth, and you will receive what you deserve. All human souls must respond to Jesus. I beg you: look to the Lamb and believe, and you will pass from death into life.

Will you pray with me?