Believe it or not, we are nearing the halfway point in our journey through John’s Gospel. We began in September of 2019 in chapter 1, and today we will complete the 10th of 21 chapters in this gospel. Who could have guessed back in September of 2019 that 2020 would be the year of a world-wide pandemic, lock downs, masks, social-distancing, Zoom meetings, hybrid school, online church services, race riots, and one of the most contentious election seasons in our nation’s history? We have all been affected by the challenges of this past year…me included. Through it all, though, I hope that our journey through John has been an encouragement and an anchor for your soul in these tumultuous and uncertain times. Pandemics, presidents, and problems will come and go…but the Word of God shall stand forever, amen?

So, as we return to John 10, let me remind you of where we are. If you recall, it is late December, the Jews are celebrating the Feast of Dedication (also known as Hanukah), Jesus is in Jerusalem walking in the temple court area known as Solomon’s Colonnade, and He is in a tense conversation with His Jewish critics. They have asked Jesus point blank to declare if He is the Messiah and the long awaited King of Israel, and Jesus responds powerfully and clearly to their question—pointing both to what He has told them in the past as well as the signs and wonders that He performed in their presence. Jesus concludes His teaching by declaring that no one will snatch His sheep out of His hand, and that He and the Father are one.

Let’s pick up the action now as we read John 10:31-42:

31 The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. 32 Jesus answered them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?” 33 The Jews answered him, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.” 34 Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods’? 35 If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken—36 do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’? 37 If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; 38 but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.” 39 Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands. 40 He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at first, and there he remained. 41 And many came to him. And they said, “John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.” 42 And many believed in him there.

My message will fall under four subheadings: 1) The Charge of Blasphemy; 2) A Biblical Defense; 3) Truth is What Truth Does; and 4) Outside the City.

I. The Charge of Blasphemy

In Leviticus 24:16, the Jewish law states: "He who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him.” The Jews took this law so seriously that they would not even speak the name of the Lord aloud. God’s name was holy, sacred, and set apart. God was the infinite, all powerful creator…and no man was worthy to utter His name nor stand in His presence. Such is why any blasphemous insult against the name of God was a capital offense, and that offense is what leads to John 10:31, “The Jews picked up stones again to stone him.” Jesus has crossed a line in according to the Jewish Pharisees—He has claimed to be God. And this is not the first time they heard Jesus make this claim. If you recall, the Jews
were enraged and ready to stone Jesus at the end of John 8 when Jesus declared, “…before Abraham was, I am.” In saying, “I and the Father are one,” …by claiming “to be” even before Abraham was born… the Jews hear this carpenter’s son from Nazareth claiming to be divine. Such a claim is clearly blasphemous in their minds because no man can claim to be God, right? Such is why they have more than once picked up stones to kill Jesus. In their thinking, stoning this man Jesus is what the law of God requires.

Note that Jesus is not intimidated by their threats. He holds His ground and He asks this question: “I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?”

Now, I want to point out a few things here before we move on.

First, we can assume that Jesus understands why they want to stone Him. Jesus surely understands why they think He is being blasphemous, and I suspect Jesus is sympathetic to their misunderstanding. After all, I think we would agree that 99.9999% of the time when a man claims to be one with God and to have existed for well over 1700 years…he’s probably a lunatic or a blasphemer of the worst kind. Jesus wisely, then, appeals to the many works of the Father He has presented to them. Why? Because the claims of Jesus are only blasphemous if they are not true, right? How can the Jews know the claims of Jesus are true? Look to His works. This has been our Lord’s defense time and again, and here in vs. 32 Jesus once again begs the question: what have I DONE that would lead you to stone me?

To which, the Jews admit they have no charge against the works of Christ; they are offended by His claims…that “being a man he makes himself God.” Church, the irony here is rich…do you see it? These Jewish leaders have got it all wrong. Jesus is not a man who makes Himself God…He is, in fact, God who has made Himself man! As John writes in the prologue, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

Again, let us be considerate and sympathetic to the first century Jews standing before Jesus on this cold winter day. Prior to Jesus, the world had not known of an instance where the God of the universe condescended to take on flesh and dwell upon the earth. Such anthropomorphic tales of the gods disguising themselves as mortal men and women were common amongst the Greek and Roman pagans; but the mere notion of God taking on flesh and walking the earth as a man was both foreign and unthinkable to the Jewish mind. Thus they are enraged that this mere mortal man should make himself God.

And that leads me to my second subheading:

II. A Biblical Argument

Remember who Jesus is talking to: He is talking to the Jewish Pharisees. So, when the Pharisees accuse Jesus of blasphemy, quite appropriately, Jesus defends Himself using their own language—the scriptures. In vs. 34 Jesus makes His case: 34 Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods’? 35 If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken— 36 do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?”
I won’t deny it…this is a tough argument that does not immediately appeal to the Western mind; but we must assume that the first century Pharisees were far more versed in the Old Testament than most of us, and Jesus clearly knew what He was saying and how they would hear Him.

So, what in the world is Jesus referring to when He says, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods?’

Jesus is quoting Psalm 82—let me read it to you:

God has taken his place in the divine council;
   in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:
2 “How long will you judge unjustly
   and show partiality to the wicked?
3 Give justice to the weak and the fatherless;
   maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.
4 Rescue the weak and the needy;
   deliver them from the hand of the wicked.”
5 They have neither knowledge nor understanding,
   they walk about in darkness;
   all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
6 I said, “You are gods,
   sons of the Most High, all of you;
7 nevertheless, like men you shall die,
   and fall like any prince.”
8 Arise, O God, judge the earth;
   for you shall inherit all the nations!

I spent a great deal of time reading about this Psalm, and I can tell you that there are different views regarding who this Psalm is speaking about. However, the most common and helpful interpretation is clearly articulated by NT scholar Leon Morris:

The passage refers to the judges of Israel and the expression “gods” is applied to them in the exercise of their high and God-given office.”

Several commentators pointed out that there are other instances in the OT where the general Hebrew word for “god” (Elohim) is used to mean “judge” (Exodus 21:1-6; Exodus 22:9, 28). With that in mind, Psalm 82:1 could easily sound like this:

“God has taken His place in the divine council; in the midst of the judges he holds judgment.”

And Psalm 82:6 (the verse Jesus is quoting) could read: “I said, ‘You are judges, sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince.’”

The point of the Psalm, then, is that God judges the judges! And even though God has appointed men with “god-like” power to judge, the mortal judges cannot be depended upon to do what it is right and judge justly. Thus, God Himself will judge the earth and be responsible for justice.

So…given a little context regarding Psalm 82, what claim is Jesus making by appealing to Psalm 82:6? Jesus is making a classic argument based on the formula: “If this….then how much more for that?”
If God appointed men to be judges and equated their important role with that of “gods,” how much more is it appropriate for the one consecrated and sent into the world by the Father to refer to Himself as “the Son of God?”

The argument here is that there is a precedent for God appointing men to serve in a “god-like” role…and the scriptures referred to them as “gods” or “judges,” but that was just a sorry example in comparison to the consecrated role of the Son who came as the Lamb of God; the Son of Man; and the Messiah of Israel! By the way, note the language of “consecration”—“Him who the Father consecrated”—within the context of the Feast of Dedication! Church, Jesus fulfills every one of the Jewish feasts, and we’ll touch on that later in John; but don’t miss this! Jesus is the Consecrated Temple; the presence of God in the flesh; the Light of the World! Jesus came as the Savior of Israel who defeats our Ancient Foe and reconciles the broken world back to God. Jesus is the New Hanukah…He is the Consecrated One, amen?

Note also what Jesus says in the midst of His defense, “…and Scripture cannot be broken…” Scripture is the ultimate authority, and the Pharisees know it. They are in no position to stone Jesus when He has made such an excellent argument from scripture, and we get the sense here that they are stymied by this argument. If they cannot prove Jesus wrong in this quote from Psalm 82, they would be guilty of murder should they stone Jesus in Solomon’s Colonnade.

Jesus has made an excellent biblical defense, but Jesus does not stop with a biblical defense; He now turns to an empirical defense.

**III. Truth Is What Truth Does**

In vss. 37-38 Jesus states, 37 If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; 38 but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.”

Church, how many of us would ever dare to use the argument that Jesus just made to His critics? Here’s what He said, “If you don’t believe what I am saying, examine my life and make up your mind by what I am doing! If my actions are inconsistent with what I am saying…if my actions do not provide compelling evidence regarding the truth of who I am and what I teach…then don’t believe me. However, look and you will see that the truth of what I am saying is demonstrated and validated in my works.”

Not many of us would be willing to make that argument, right? Most of us live by the age-old parental creed, “Do as I say, not as I do!” But not Jesus.

Jesus knows that His claims to be one with the Father, the beloved Son of the Father, and the long-awaited Messiah of Israel are only blasphemous if they are false claims. Jesus even acknowledges that anybody who would make such claims should not be believed IF…IF there were not sufficient works to substantiate the claims. So Jesus makes His appeal—“Examine my life. Examine my works. And even if you can’t believe me, believe the works…”

The works that Jesus performed were those things that only God could accomplish. Only God could heal a man bound to a mat for 38 years. Only God could restore sight to a man born blind.
Only God could account for the authority held by this peasant from Nazareth who spoke in a way the world had never heard before or has ever heard since. Only God…working in and through Jesus, His Son, could account for the works these Jews had witnessed with their own eyes.

Truth is what Truth does. Jesus spoke the truth; He lived the truth; and Jesus said it clearly of Himself in John 14:6, “I AM THE TRUTH.”

Church, the claims of Christianity are not always easy to believe for many people. We live in a world of routine and predictability. We don’t often see lame people healed or people born blind receiving their sight. We don’t have the pleasure of seeing Jesus in person performing mighty signs and wonders. So it’s understandable that, from time to time, we struggle with doubt. I remember a time in my life when I was struggling with doubt and I came upon Fredrick Buechner’s definition of doubt in a little book he wrote long ago. Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.

Church, like the Pharisees, we may find it hard to accept the claims made by Jesus in the New Testament, but I would again appeal to the works of Jesus that were accomplished long ago, as well as the works of Jesus that continue to this day as evidence regarding His truthfulness. It would only take a cursory study of history to see the miraculous works accomplished in the name of Jesus…such works that would lead an objective observer to say, “Only God…” Study the history of modern science, the role and value of women, the emancipation of slaves, the establishment of orphanages, universities, and hospitals…in Jesus’ name, and we would have to conclude, “Only God!” Listen to testimony after testimony of those liberated from addictions, those healed of a broken past, those marriages that were redeemed and countless other transformations accomplished in Jesus’ name. Think of your own life and all the little coincidences that led you to where you are today…sitting here listening to this message…and we would have no choice but to confess, “Only God!”

The evidence of who Jesus is continues to shine brightly in every generation. The evidence comes in our words and testimonies to be sure; but the validation of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done comes in what we—the Body of Christ—do in His name, amen? A few months ago this church heard from Jesus to love on His children, particularly single moms who were struggling during the lock down. The church responded with unprecedented generosity, but do you know what those single mom’s observed and wrote over and over again in their thank you cards? “Only God!” They literally used those words over and over again. Only God could have provided at just the right moment to save them from losing their home, or worse…losing hope. Only God could have heard their cry in the dark night of doubt and despair. Only God!

Church, truth is what truth does. Jesus is the Truth, and as we do what Jesus has called us to do in His name, the TRUTH of His love and lordship are made plain to a watching world, amen? As we grow in our faith, may we, through the power of the Holy Spirit, become those who appeal to our works, our actions, and our behavior…as evidence and validation for the biblical convictions we hold so dear.

Let us conclude now with my fourth and final subheading:
IV. Outside the City

Even after the compelling defense made by Jesus, John reports in vs. 39, 39 Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.

The Pharisees still do not believe; and we know why, right? As Jesus said earlier to these same men in vs. 26, “You do not believe because you are not among my sheep.” These souls have hardened hearts; they do not recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd, so again they are determined to arrest Jesus. John records that Jesus “escaped their hands,” and though we don’t have any details of His escape, the point is clear and redundant: no one will touch Jesus until His hour has come.

Following His escape from the Pharisees, the Father leads Jesus outside the city. In vss. 40-42 we read:

40 He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at first, and there he remained. 41 And many came to him. And they said, “John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.” 42 And many believed in him there.

In many respects, the Gospel of John has returned full circle. Jesus returns to the place where He was baptized; the place where His “forerunner” (John the Baptist) had prepared the nation of Israel to meet their Messiah. There, in the countryside, away from the politics and power struggles of the city, Jesus rested with His disciples. And amazingly, in that rural setting, John records that “many came to him… and many believed in him there.”

Many sheep heard the voice of their Shepherd; and they followed Him outside the city. There, away from the visceral attacks of the Pharisees, average people could see what the religious elite could not: “everything that John said about this man was true.”

Church, I love the city, and I know God loves cities because cities are full of people, and God loves people, amen? But let us not miss what the text reports: many came to Jesus outside the city, and many believed in him there. I may be reading into this a bit too much, but this picture of coming to Jesus outside the city resonates with me. I often find that to commune with Jesus; to hear from Jesus; and to see who Jesus is so that my faith might be strengthened…I need to get out of the city for a while. I need to step away from the busy-ness, the noise, the pace, and the distractions of city life. I need time to reflect and to remind myself that everything Jesus ever said is true, and that HIS truth has been validated time and again in my life.

I think for many of us, the city is a place of distraction, argument, and politics. We run hard and fast with our heads down, moving from one thing to the next, so we lose perspective on what is TRUE and what is most important in our lives. If that picture describes your life, I appeal to you: go outside the city and spend some time with Jesus. Get out of the rut and routine to reflect upon all that Christ has done, that your faith might be strengthened, and your hope restored. And then come back to the city to faithfully pursue the calling that the Lord placed on all His disciples: to be the light of Christ in this hurting culture, so that the lost are found, the broken are made whole, the fatherless find hope, and our city is blessed. Amen? Let us pray.