

THE WORD BECAME FLESH: STUDIES IN JOHN 1-10

Notes For Week One: In The Beginning (John 1:1-18)

From the start, we can see that John's account of the gospel has a different emphasis than the first three. John focuses even more intimately on Jesus the individual, and more sharply on how Jesus affects others. This is in part because John wrote his gospel much later, and most of his readers had not lived during Jesus' lifetime. Thus John is of obvious importance for us today.

Word, Life, & Light (John 1:1-5)

John uses the odd title of "the Word", which we usually associate with written Scripture, as his introduction to Jesus Christ's nature. John also refers to Jesus as our source of light and life - associations that will be re-emphasized throughout the book. Rather than dealing with factual details, John would prefer us first to consider Jesus from a broader, more spiritual perspective.

The opening passage of John introduces several main ideas. For this week's study, we shall use the first five verses as an introduction to the book; then we shall take a brief look at the background to the gospel of John. The following passage (verses 6-18) will then introduce several more ideas about Jesus.

The association between "the Word" and God re-appears often* in John's gospel (1:1-2). When he tells us that the Word was with God, and also that the Word actually was God, John is being both simple and mysterious. His opening phrase deliberately parallels Genesis 1:1, calling us to think back not merely to the start of Jesus' earthly life - as the other gospel writers do - but all the way back to the creation of the universe, before human sin had complicated so many things.

* John refers to Jesus as "the Word" again in 1:14. Later, he will use the same term (in Greek, *logos*, "logos") to refer to God's expression of his will through Jesus - for example, in 5:24, 5:38, 8:37, 8:51-55, 10:35, 12:48, 15:3, 17:6, 17:14, and 17:17. John and the other three gospels use the same term in different senses, though John more often uses it in a generalized sense that goes beyond the written Scriptures. No precise verbal definition matches the way that John uses the term, but we will be close if we understand it to be a general expression of God's nature and will.

By referring to Jesus in this way, John calls us to think beyond Jesus' physical nature, to make sure that we do not think of him as merely a human philosopher or moralist. Like the other gospel writers, John overtly presents Jesus as having a supernatural dimension. One difference is that John begins by basing Jesus' identity not on covenant or law or history, but on his very nature. This is in part because of when John wrote (see below); but John's portrait of Jesus is, from the beginning, a clear challenge to earthly minds of all types*.

* The Greeks usually used "logos" to refer to "reason" or "thinking" in a general way, yet John's usage makes it impossible to interpret it that way here. Similarly, the Jews strongly associated the "word" with written (or spoken) Scripture - and again John goes out of his way to avoid this limited implication.

The Word's light forms a sharp contrast with the world's darkness (1:3-5). Yet here too things are not so simple, for John emphasizes that it was through him (Jesus the Word) that all things were made*. This in turn implies that the world in its ideal state must then be pure and perfect. But - recall also the contrast between Genesis 2 and Genesis 3 - the problem of human sin hinders God's presence and necessitates the redemptive ministry of Jesus.

* See also Hebrews 1:2. Neither passage attempts to explain whatever precise role Jesus may have played in creation, just as Genesis 1 never explains any of the mechanics involved. John thus does not expect us to dwell on these unanswered questions - rather, he mentions this aspect of Jesus' identity so that we will keep it in mind when we consider the world's response to Jesus (for example, in verse 10 below).

Jesus brings both life and light to those who dwell in this darkened world. His life gives us light, and vice versa. Some of the best-known verses in John emphasize these ideas, yet the apostle also reminds us often of the world's reluctance to accept these blessings. Here in his introductory remarks, John makes an interesting observation: much of the trouble arises specifically because the darkness has not understood the light.

Indeed, even many who believe in Jesus have remarkably little understanding of what he really came to do - and this often shows in our lives and ministries. John's challenge to his readers is thus to set aside our preconceptions about Jesus, and even our usual frame of reference that sees him in terms of specific actions or statements. John wants to help us to develop a deeper faith in Jesus that can affect us in ways going far beyond outward actions or factual beliefs.

These ideas will make even more sense when we take a brief look at the background to the gospel of John. All of John's writings* (the gospel, his epistles, and Revelation) date from a later era than the time of most of the other New Testament writings. John outlived just about everyone from the generation in which Jesus had lived his human lifetime**, and in the later years of the 1st century AD he had become a legendary figure, as the last physical link to Jesus.

* John does not identify himself by name in any of these except for Revelation. The strongest evidence for John being the author is that the early Christians universally understood him to have written all of these books. This is reflected in surviving sources from the late 1st century through the 2nd century.

** It is usually believed that John was still fairly young when he met Jesus, although commentators differ widely as to the details of John's biographical details. Note his comments about himself in John 21:20-24.

The types of spiritual problems common then and common now are remarkably similar. Despite many obvious differences in the trappings of human society, human nature doesn't change. In the era when John wrote his gospel - probably sometime between AD 80 and AD 95 - the church struggled a lot with divisions, disruptive influences, and false doctrines, amongst other ills.

By that time, the church had been established for long enough that many of its members thought of it as an institution or an organization, rather than an informal, spiritual fellowship of believers. It was becoming common to conceive of "what the church teaches" as an important factor in making decisions. Church hierarchies of increasingly authoritarian leaders were starting to impose uniform teachings and methods, while at the other extreme small groups rebelled against the mainline church and formed new sects.

John's emphasis on Jesus is more personal than it is in the other gospels, and this is one of the sources of John's distinctive style. Although it is hard to describe with precision exactly what the difference is, some familiarity with John can help us to see that much of his writing style comes from his emphasis on Jesus' personal interactions with others.

Whereas the style and much of the material can be very similar in Matthew, Mark and Luke*, John's style is immediately recognizable. As a generality, John often emphasizes the personal

side over theological, doctrinal, or moral considerations. He wants us to get to know Jesus as intimately as he once did - as a friend and teacher, but also as Lord and Savior.

* These three books are sometimes called the "synoptic gospels", to distinguish them from John. Commentators often look for elusive theories to explain the similarities among them, sometimes claiming (without historical evidence) that there was a mythical source document they all used. The first three gospels were all written around AD 60 or shortly afterwards, and they each collected familiar teachings about Jesus. They drew much more from oral tradition than from any written documents. For more, see the notes from the 2009 class, "The Living Word Of God", along with the sources used for that study.

Setting aside John's personal relationship with Jesus, the contrast with the first three gospels comes in part from it being written so much later than the others. The passage of time had changed the ways that Jesus was viewed, even by believers. John omitted much of the material in Matthew, Mark and Luke because these teachings had become such common knowledge. But the very teachings about Jesus had now made him seem less of a reality, and more of a 'subject' to be studied and mastered. Here too we see one of the major spiritual needs in the church today.

In studying John, then, we can get even more out of the book when we remember the needs John is addressing. John is of course just as valuable as the other gospels are as a source of teachings on Jesus' ministry. Yet we will find the book even more rewarding and challenging if we are willing to study it with a perspective that goes beyond logic and law.

If we can overcome our tendency to compare every teaching with our own beliefs and attitudes, if we can resist our fleshly craving to look at ourselves, if we can patiently allow our minds to hear a new perspective rather than merely looking for new facts, then we can find in John a chance to renew and strengthen our faith in him and our relationship with him. Even amongst the apostles, John had a unique relationship with Jesus; and his gospel shows us some wonderful insights into Jesus' nature and ministry.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does John call Jesus the 'Word'? Can we develop a precise definition of what he means? What does it mean that the Word "was God"? How does John's introduction help us to study John? What might it tell us about his emphasis? What role should we expect 'life' and 'light' to play?

The Word Comes To The World (John 1:6-13)

Jesus had many amazing qualities by nature, yet more amazing than any of these - and far more precious to us for the hope it brings us - was his choice to come to our earth. John's affection for Jesus helped him to be keenly aware of what this must have cost Jesus; and the gospel writer was also intensely conscious of the many contrasts between God and his Creation.

God prepared human witnesses to the Light that came into the world (1:6-9). The first was another John, whom we often call John The Baptist. He was the messenger, foretold and long awaited, who cleared the way for the Messiah*. John himself brought no light into the world; he was only a witness to the true light of Jesus. We often forget what an extraordinary task John had, and how much he paid for it. God placed great trust in this human, and John consistently showed remarkable humility in drawing attention towards Jesus and God, not towards himself.

* Notice that John's gospel does not refer to the other John as 'the Baptist', although all three other gospels frequently use the term. (The NIV section heading between verses 18 and 19 is not in the original text.)

When the light of God came into our world, the world had a choice (1:10-13). Sad to say, Jesus was rejected by his own world. Many humans choose to deny, reject, or simply ignore their Creator and his Son. We can - and too often do - spend hours bemoaning the faithlessness of the world. Yet the reasons why the worldly reject Jesus openly are often the same things that cause us to ignore or explain away his more difficult teachings, even as our mouths claim to believe.

Of the things that Jesus gives to those who do believe, John mentions first of all the right to be born of God. This is both a blessing and a responsibility, as we know from Jesus' famous conversation with Nicodemus in John 3. Notice that John does not try to sell us on what a wonderful blessing it is to be born again. To anyone who believes, there is no question of its incalculable worth.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why did God send John (the Baptist) as a witness? Why is it important to remember that he himself was not the light? What lessons ought we to learn from this perspective? Why did the world reject the light that Jesus brought? Are there things we can learn from this? What does it mean to be born of God? Why is it a good thing? Why do we so often fail to appreciate the importance of it?

The Word Dwells Among Us (John 1:14-18)

Jesus did not merely make a royal visit to our world. He lived like one of us, and even lived among us. Jesus' earthly form and ministry both emphasize God's great desire to be with us and to have fellowship with us. The greatest blessings of the gospel are those that come directly from living in the presence of God - which would be impossible without the grace of Jesus.

Through Jesus, this earth has seen the glory of God (1:14). Glory is another of the concepts to which John will often return. We have seen Jesus' glory, and Jesus in turn shows us God's glory. He shows us God's glory through his life here ("the Son is the radiance of God's glory", Hebrews 1:3); and he also brings us the grace that will allow us to see God's eternal glory when we are freed from the constraints of our mortal bodies.

Jesus is also the one and only* true Son of God, the only true Word. This is not a legalistic claim, for it rests on Jesus' very nature. Again John will return to this idea later, as he contrasts Jesus' true light with the attempts of self-important humans to set themselves up as authorities on God. Here again we have a spiritual struggle that characterizes both John's era and our own.

* Literally, the only-begotten. The same term appears in John 3:16, and some versions translate the phrase literally in both places. John does not use the term in a literal, physical sense - Jesus is the "only-begotten" of God in a non-physical, spiritual sense: he is the Father's only true heir and Son.

We also hear the testimony of the witness, the other John, who testifies to Jesus' superiority over him and all human spiritual leaders (1:15). Though Jesus will come, by earth's chronology, after John, he was already alive long before John lived. Thus, "he who comes after me has surpassed me, because he was before me." Once more we see that John does not want anyone even thinking about exalting a mere witness - John wants all the glory to go to the true light.

Jesus makes his Father known to us in ways that nothing else can (1:16-18). Because Jesus allows us to come into God's presence, we can have so many more blessings in Christ than were possible under any law. Jesus brings us one blessing after another because God wants to give us one blessing after another. Here too we see an aspect of Jesus that John will often mention.

Amongst the things that Jesus shows us about God are grace and truth. The contrast between Jesus and Moses is hardly intended to belittle Moses*, but just to exalt Jesus. Because Moses was only a mortal, fallible human, his laws were limited in what they could show us about God - indeed, they mostly showed us how fallible and limited we all are. They did teach God's grace by implication; but until Jesus came, God could never show us the full extent of his grace.

* Note the parallel now between John and Exodus, to go with the deliberate parallel with Genesis in 1:1.

Thus Jesus is essential as a source of grace and truth. For we can only fully see God's truth when we see and accept his grace. God's grace is an integral and essential part of his nature, and of his truth. Only Jesus has ever been at the Father's side; only Jesus has ever seen his Father in his full truth, glory, and grace. All of these things can help us to see how much we have to look forward to if we are willing to take a new look at Jesus, looking beyond our fleshly perspectives.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is glory? Can mortal humans ever understand God's true glory? Why does the apostle John quote John the Baptist here? What significance does his testimony have in this context? In what ways - whether mentioned by John here or not - does Jesus make God known to us? What other Scriptures point out this aspect of Jesus' ministry? Why does John specifically mention grace and truth?

Sources & References

Of the many commentaries and study guides on John, the following are among the more useful:

F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel Of John*

John Elowsky (editor), *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture - John 1-10*

Frank Gaebelin (editor) & Merrill Tenney, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 9*

B.W. Johnson, *Commentary On John* (Restoration Commentaries)

J.W. McGarvey & Philip Pendleton, *The Fourfold Gospel - A Harmony Of The Four Gospels*

Bruce Milne, *The Message Of John* (The Bible Speaks Today)

Leon Morris, *The Gospel According To John* (NICNT)

Guy Woods, *A Commentary On The Gospel According To John* (Gospel Advocate)

Just let me know if you would like suggestions on references for your own study of John.

- Mark Garner, *Northland Church Of Christ, March 2011*

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THE WORD BECAME FLESH: STUDIES IN JOHN 1-10

Notes For Week Two: The Word Meets The Word (John 1:1-11)

John has presented Jesus to us as the Word made flesh, the life that brings light into the darkness on this earth. We now follow Jesus as he first begins to draw attention in our world. First we shall see Jesus heralded as God's Son by God's messenger John the Baptist and then we shall see some of Jesus earliest interactions with his future apostles.

Review of Last Week's Class - In The Beginning

Jesus is the Word, who brings life and light into this world (1:1-5). John emphasizes general ideas more than the factual details of Jesus' life. This is partly due to the historical background. John wrote his gospel account much later than the other three inspired authors did, when the biographical details of Jesus' life were established as common knowledge. But the church had become an institution, and Jesus was seen more as a topic of study than a living Savior. In studying John, it helps to remember the importance of Jesus as a living presence among us.

John tells us how the Word came into the world (1:6-13). John the Baptist was the first public witness, a faithful human who clearly understood that all he could do was to point others to the true light. The world was given a choice, and most persons in the world chose not to accept Jesus as the Father's Son and heir. To those who in faith did acknowledge their Savior, Jesus gave no earthly riches, but instead enabled them to become children of God.

So the Word came to dwell amongst mortal humans (1:14-18). His life lets us see the glory of God reflected in his Son. Jesus the Son and Word makes known the Father. Jesus shows us everything about God that can be grasped by those living in this temporary world.

It is worth reflecting here on what we hope to get from studying the gospel of John. We should not expect to find methods or tactics, for John knows that these rarely, if ever, are what we really need. Nor should we expect to find facts or proof texts with which to win arguments. Even when these things 'work', they rarely meet the true needs of unbelievers or erring Christians.

But there are many spiritual riches in the gospel of John, if we can accept his call to refocus and to reconsider our perspective. Each of us in our own way finds the true gospel mysterious, troublesome, or uncomfortable. John wants to help us with these things, if we will let him.

Who is John (John 1:1-8)

Before Jesus became a source of speculation and controversy, John the Baptist was the subject of considerable rumor and discussion. The apostle John records for us a conversation between the Baptist and a group of religious officials who are eager to analyze and classify him. In his determination to stick to his given message, John is a worthy forerunner of the Messiah Jesus.

John the Baptist appeared on the scene as a voice in the desert, attracting attention for many different reasons (1:19-23). We know from the other gospel accounts that many Jews listened to John in sincerity and anticipation. But the Baptist's ministry was also the subject of scrutiny; and here we see an investigation launched by the religious leaders into John's activities.

These experts take little interest in John's message (which emphasized repentance - see Matthew 3:7-12, Mark 1:4-8, and Luke 3:7-18). They only want to know who he is, what authority he thinks he has, or what credentials he can present to them. They know that the Scriptures foretell a Messiah, and they believe that the prophet Elijah is scheduled to return*, probably just before the Messiah. Many of them also speculated that a great prophet would also come sometime**. Yet John, when questioned, quickly indicates that he is 'none of the above.'

* See Malachi 3:1 and 4:5. God did not literally plan to send Elijah himself (although those obsessed with literal interpretation sometimes claim that Elijah's appearance at the transfiguration "fulfilled" Malachi's prophecy). Jesus said of John the Baptist, "if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come" (Matthew 11:14). Thus John was an Elijah figure in a non-literal sense, which explains why he says here that he is not Elijah - he knew that his questioners expected Elijah himself. See also Matthew 17:10-13.

** This was based on Deuteronomy 18:15-19, a subject of debate between those who understood it as a reference to the Messiah, and those who thought that it meant 'The' Prophet, a separate special messenger. In its original context, could also refer to a succession of prophets. Note, though, that in Acts 7:37 Stephen implies that Moses was referring at least in part to the Messiah.

Asked for some description about himself, John quotes Isaiah, describing himself as the voice in the desert who prepares the way for someone greater. Even before Jesus himself arrives on the scene, John persistently and faithfully calls attention to his successor.

Because John does not fit into any of their pigeonholes, some of the Pharisees ask him what reason he could have for baptizing anyone (1:24-28). These Pharisees had apparently waited for the rest of the delegation to ask the routine questions, but now they feel they can speak up and request the explanation for John's actions.

Notice that John doesn't really answer their question, except perhaps by implication. "Among you stands one you do not know" is not literally true, but what John means is that the coming Messiah will not arrive in a spectacular or eye-catching manner. Jesus has already been in the world, living an ordinary (if sinless) life. John himself will soon point him out to the discerning.

John again openly confesses that he is unworthy to untie the sandals of his successor. He is not concerned with what the Pharisees think of him, for he knows his role well. Any time they spend analyzing John himself, whether to criticize him or to praise him, will be largely wasted. His role is to call attention to Jesus, for we must all decide for ourselves who Jesus is.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does the apostle John tell us about John the Baptist's conversation with the religious authorities? Why do the authorities question him about his identity? Is this an example for us (either good or bad) in any way? What do John's statements about himself tell us? Why indeed did John baptize? Does his response to the Pharisees explain this? What should we learn from this passage?

Who is Jesus (John 1:1-4)

John the Baptist knew and accepted his important but thankless role. He leaves no ambiguity that it is Jesus who is the Lamb of God. John openly proclaims who Jesus is, and then he continues by encouraging his own followers to begin following Jesus instead. This leads to a new series of events, as two of these persons in their turn seek to understand who Jesus is.

The time now comes for John, the witness to the light, to give his full testimony (1:29-34). He does not merely make the identification for himself, but rather calls out to everyone to "Look!" when Jesus comes to him. Those who heeded John's appeal may have been a bit disappointed,

for Jesus at this time did nothing remarkable himself. The sight of Jesus would at first have seemed thoroughly commonplace, one among many coming to be baptized - a humble example.

But John continues, describing how he saw the Spirit come down from heaven and rest upon Jesus*. The Baptist openly identifies Jesus as the Son of God, just as he had been called to do. No doubt there were many who did not understand or who did not pay attention, but we shall see that at least a few of them understood the implications of John's testimony.

* This is also mentioned in Matthew 3:16, Mark 1:10-11, and Luke 3:22; yet in those passages it is not stated whether the crowds saw the Spirit and/or heard God's voice. The account here in John seems to suggest that only John and Jesus may have observed these things.

The very next day, John again sees Jesus and tells his followers, "Look, the Lamb of God!" (1:35-39). Two of his own followers* immediately trail after Jesus, addressing him as "Rabbi" (that is, Teacher). He is indeed a new rabbi, though not in the sense the word would have normally been used. Jesus will teach them things on a far more profound level than they have ever encountered before. We are left to guess what they actually did in their first meeting with Jesus, but it seems safe to say that their lives would never be the same**.

* They can also be referred to as John's disciples. The Greek word literally means simply a "learner".

** Compare the initial meetings with future apostles here with the ones in the other gospels, since both contain interactions with Andrew and Peter. It is impossible for this passage to be the same event as, for example, Mark 1:16-18. Thus it seems likely that Jesus may have first spent time with them as described here in John, and then soon afterwards came to their boats to call them away permanently. More complicated theories have been proposed, but they usually end up being even more convoluted.

The future apostle Andrew is one of these two (the other is unidentified), and soon after meeting Jesus he finds his brother Simon (1:40-42). He eagerly assures his brother that, "we have found the Messiah*", and this in turn results in Simon Peter's first meeting with Jesus. Perhaps already seeing into Simon's heart, Jesus at once gives him the enigmatic nickname of Cephas, or Peter**.

* Messiah is Hebrew for "anointed one", and Christ is Greek for "anointed one". These inter-changeable names are given to Jesus because he was chosen, or anointed, by God as the world's Lord and Savior.

** The Greek word πέτρος ("petros") and the Aramaic word "Cephas" (a transliteration) both mean a rock, in the sense of a small rock or pebble.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why might John's two followers have so quickly decided to follow Jesus? What might they have understood about him? Are there ways in which we can emulate their response? How might John the Baptist have influenced them? What can we learn from this?

The Trusting & The Skeptic (John 1:43-51)

Jesus' small group of followers continues to grow. Jesus himself invites Philip to follow him, and Philip in turn brings his friend Nathanael to meet Jesus. The eager and seemingly trusting Philip forms an interesting contrast with the more skeptical, cynical Nathanael. Yet both of them will come to see the same important things in Jesus.

First, the enthusiastic Philip begins to follow Jesus (1:43-45). He responds at once to Jesus' invitation, and like Andrew, Philip is already certain of Jesus' special identity. So when, soon afterwards, he finds his friend Nathanael*, he tells Nathanael that, "we have found the One" who had been foretold for so long. But Nathanael is not so easily moved to excitement.

* Nathanael is not mentioned in the Scriptures outside of John (see also 21:2). Because John depicts him as a future apostle, commentators usually assume that he appears in the other gospels and Acts under a different name (as is the case with some of the other apostles). He is usually, with some justification, considered to be the same as Bartholomew, who is mentioned in the other books. Some commentators have used some added guesswork to 're-construct' his original name as Nathanael Bar-Tolmai.

So Jesus has to persuade a skeptic (1:46-51). Nathanael replies to Philip's enthusiastic description of Jesus with sarcasm, mocking Jesus' hometown of Nazareth without responding to the substance of Philip's claims. In response, Philip simply asks him to, "come and see"; that is, to come and see Jesus for himself.

As simple as this episode is, Philip gives us a worthwhile example. He doesn't argue with Nathanael, and he does not critique him or correct him for his unbelief. He knows that what Nathanael needs is Jesus, not correction or even logic. He knows that the best way for Nathanael to believe will be for him to see Jesus for himself. Philip needs no credit for 'discovering' the Messiah, and he does not pretend that he himself can adequately explain the Christ.

Our desire, too, should not be to persuade anyone that we have the best church in town, or to pretend that we have the right answers to everything. It should be to get others to spend some time with Jesus, so that they can see him for themselves, and can decide on that basis whether to follow him on his terms, not on ours.

Jesus famously calls Nathanael a "true Israelite", commending him for his honesty, yet with the subtle implication that God has so often met with skepticism and cynicism from his own people. Aside from this ironical comment, though, Jesus sees no reason to criticize Nathanael personally. He displays his power simply but unmistakably, explaining that he could 'see' Nathanael under the fig tree without being present physically. Suddenly the skeptic becomes an ardent believer!

Jesus downplays this too, pointing out that far greater experiences - some exhilarating and some fearful - await those who choose to follow their Messiah. He hints briefly at the great spiritual realities* that Nathanael cannot see now, providing no full explanations, but giving his followers the expectation of becoming part of something bigger than any earthly group or activity. So too, Jesus calls us not to a life of earthly excitement, but to a ministry that transcends this world.

* The imagery of angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man closely parallels Jacob's vision in Genesis 28:10-12. In both cases, the point is that there is an entire realm of spiritual reality that we can only dimly sense, much less be able to interpret or understand. In both cases, we are not being called to decipher the hidden meaning of the imagery, but rather are being called to a greater level of humility, acknowledging that mortal beings cannot begin to comprehend reality on the level that God knows it.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What can we learn from Philip's response to Jesus? Why might Nathanael have reacted as he did? How else could Philip have handled this? Did he make a good choice? How does Jesus' handling of Nathanael help us respond to cynics and skeptics? Why might Nathanael have changed his attitude so quickly? Why does Jesus try to get him to refocus again? What "greater things" will we see?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, March 2011
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THE WORD BECAME FLESH: STUDIES IN JOHN 1-10

Notes For Week Three: Transformations (John 1)

Jesus transforms everything by his life and his light. During his earthly ministry, he frequently displayed the power to transform the physical world in any way that he saw appropriate. Yet physical miracles were only a prelude to the far deeper and more profound transformations that he wished to bring about in those who would believe in him and follow him.

Review of Previous Classes

The story of Jesus goes back to the very beginning (John 1:1-18), for Jesus is the word, the life, and the light. When the world meets the Word, the world starts to ask questions (John 1:19-51).

First, the world asks who John the Baptist is. He has no title - he is simply a voice in the desert calling attention to the Messiah. When asked why he baptizes, he simply says to watch for the one who comes after him. When John points out Jesus, the world wants to know who he is, too. John twice calls out, "Look!", for he wants all attention focused on Jesus. Thus Andrew and another of John's followers follow Jesus. They spend the day with Jesus, and are convinced he is the Messiah. Andrew brings his brother Simon to Jesus, a meeting that will lead to many things.

The small group is soon joined by the trusting Philip and the skeptic Nathanael. Philip responds enthusiastically to Jesus, assuring Nathanael that, "we have found the One!" Nathanael must be persuaded; but Jesus quickly turns him into an eager believer. Then Jesus tries to slow him down, pointing him towards things more important than mere predictions or foreknowledge.

What drew Jesus' earliest followers to him? They have seen no miracles yet (see John 2:11 and 10:41). They had John's testimony about the Spirit, John's statement that Jesus was the 'Lamb of God' - and they had Jesus' own words and actions. So too, we must be content with a lot of worthwhile, yet never quite tangible, reasons to believe. Yet we too, if we seek to know the truth, can be moved to the same devotion that we see in Jesus' earliest disciples. Both then and now, personal interaction with Jesus is more valuable than miracles or factual knowledge.

Transforming Water (John 1:1-11)

Until now, Jesus has performed no miracles. But now an occasion arises, perhaps unexpectedly, that gives him the opportunity to perform the first of his many public miraculous signs. It is an interesting setting in several respects, and the informal circumstances in their way form a suitable preview of Jesus' ministry to come.

A wedding in Cana, apparently involving friends of Jesus' family, becomes the site of his first display of miraculous power (2:1-5). Jesus, his mother, and his disciples had been invited to the festivities; and they are attending the celebratory feast* without attracting any special attention.

* This is the same custom that our society would call a 'reception'. Having a meal and/or similar social activities after a wedding ceremony is an ancient custom, going back well before the time of Jesus.

When the supply of wine runs out, Jesus' mother points this out to him in such a way so as to suggest that he might be able to help. Jesus replies to his mother's veiled request somewhat enigmatically*, emphasizing that his "time has not yet come" - that is, that the time for his public

ministry has not quite arrived**. But it was apparently close enough - Jesus decides, whether out of affection for his mother or because he realizes that this time is as good as any, that he will go ahead and do something.

* His address to her is familiar but affectionate. The NIV translates it as "dear woman", which is non-literal, but it gives a slightly better idea of his tone than the NASB's literal but more abrupt "woman".

** Here again, there are chronological questions about this episode in relation to the beginnings of his public ministry as they are recounted in the other gospel accounts. As before, see the recommended sources if you wish to do further study.

And so Jesus performs his first miracle, in somewhat impromptu fashion (2:6-11). Notice that he makes no real ceremony, simply pointing out the availability of some large water jars*, and asking the servants to fill them with water. Jesus does no 'magic', and he says nothing special. But when the jars are taken to the banquet master, he is surprised to find more wine - and wine of much better quality than the wine that had been purchased for the meal.

* John notes that the jars were there to accommodate the many rituals involving water that the Jews of the time practiced. These rituals were for the sake of ceremony, not hygiene. These are the kinds of rituals at issue in passages such as Mark 7:1-5.

Although this miracle meets a less urgent need than most of the miracles that Jesus performed, there are still many similarities. His miracles are unaccompanied by hype or by pretense, and they accomplish things of practical usefulness. This miracle, like the others, was also unmistakable to those who saw the whole thing - yet Jesus is unconcerned that others may not grasp the whole significance. John tells us that this was an important point in the disciples' understanding of Jesus. For the first time, they have seen a clear display of Jesus' mastery over the physical world, and it gives them a new reason to have faith in him.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why might Jesus' mother have expected him to help in this situation? Why did he say that his time had not yet come? Why did he go ahead and do the miracle anyway? What features of this miracle are similar to those of his other miracles? Does this one have any special significance?

Transforming Religion (John 1:1-1)

Jesus now visits Jerusalem for the first time since John the Baptist had revealed him to the public. The selling and money-changing in the temple area was a long-established practice, challenged by no one. Yet Jesus not only questions it, but forcibly stops it. So too, his ministry will call his followers to transform the ways that they think of religious observance and practice.

Jesus goes to the temple* for the first time since being pointed out by John the Baptist (2:12-14). The selling and exchanging have been going on for many years, but until now even Jesus has done nothing about it; his "time had not yet come". Now, though, he makes an important point.

* Jesus seems to have followed all of the common Jewish religious observances, and this would have led him to the temple on various occasions, even though he did not reside in Jerusalem.

The abundant commercial presence in the temple courts is an example of how human logic and expediency can lead us astray without having any ill intentions. These practices had originated long before the time of Jesus, as a practical aid to out-of-town worshipers coming to Jerusalem. Originally, they had been based on commands from the old law plus additional observances that

had become established over the years, regarding particular types of animal to sacrifice or specific values of coin* with which to redeem something.

* The law and/or historical religious practices sometimes specified a particular denomination of coin, and many persons stuck closely to the letter of the law. So the money-changers were relied upon to stock the various coins - sometimes obsolete - that were expected. Later, during the Roman occupation, many Jews refused to use Roman coins for religious transactions, even when the particular coin itself did not matter.

Starting as a convenience, the practice grew to where anything vaguely related to the temple and its activities could be sold or exchanged in the court area. Can we say that the whole practice was "good at the beginning, but it went too far?" We don't know - but in any case, we know that human logic, desire for convenience, and sometimes overly literal use of Scripture combined over time with the profit motive to create a situation that Jesus found unacceptable. Yet we also sometimes accept and approve of cultural practices that run directly contrary to the teachings of the New Testament, if we are led astray by our own exaggerated sense of fleshly loyalty.

Jesus' clearing of the temple courts* is a rare instance of him taking direct action to correct a problem. As such, we should try to understand why this was different from so many other ills of his time (2:15-17). From using a whip to driving off the sacrificial animals to scattering coins, Jesus kicks up a full-fledged ruckus. Yet there were other, seemingly far worse problems - violence, oppression, poverty, and many more - that he never addressed in such a way.

* Evidently Jesus returned to do the same thing some three years or so later. Unless we assume that at least one of the gospel writers was mistaken, there isn't any way to harmonize John 2 with the accounts in the other gospels of Jesus doing something similar during the last week of his life (Mathew 21:12-13, Mark 11:12-18, Luke 19:45-46). Human nature being what it is, there isn't any reason to think that the same practices wouldn't have been resumed, perhaps immediately. Jesus thus did the same thing at a later time.

Jesus' disciples are impressed by his "zeal for his Father's house"; that is, they realize that he sees the temple as a special place: it is holy*, belonging to God alone. Like us, they rarely saw Jesus do anything like this. Eventually, they could have seen that Jesus' strong words and direct action were reserved for things that touched directly on areas involving holiness. He was gracious and patient with many kinds of sins, but he spoke firmly against those who used God (or things that belonged to God alone) as a pretext to pursue their own interests or agendas, just as he strongly denounced those who considered themselves morally superior or more spiritual than others.

* Recall from Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus that 'holy' simply refers to something belonging to God alone, something not belonging to this world. Because the temple was consecrated to God, Jesus firmly resisted uncleanness in its vicinity, just as God in the Old Testament consistently warned against the unclean and the holy coming into contact.

In applying Jesus' example, then, we must set aside not only some commonly accepted erroneous beliefs, but also our own fleshly opinions and preferences. Jesus' example does not give us grounds to reprove or correct anything we find sinful. It is, rather, a call to us, more than to the worldly, not to distort the gospel to serve earthly ends, whether economic, political, or otherwise.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How might the commerce in the temple have grown from a mere convenience into the 'marketplace' that Jesus denounces? Why did everyone accept it or tolerate it? Can we do the same thing? What other ills in Jesus' time might seem 'worse' by human standards? Why did he choose this one to oppose? How should we learn from his example?

Transforming Minds (John 8:18-5)

Now that he has been revealed to the public, Jesus spends his time in Jerusalem teaching and performing miracles. His words and actions begin to attract both devoted belief and bitter opposition - a pattern that will follow him for the rest of his earthly life. Yet Jesus himself is not swayed by either of these, for he has a profound understanding of human nature.

In the aftermath of the temple clearing, the religious officials demand that Jesus prove his authority to do such things (2:18-22). The practice of demanding credentials, instead of seeking truth, is a common failing of human nature in every era and society - so we should not criticize these individuals alone. The problem is the same whether the credentials we seek are based on status, accomplishments, or miracles - none of these things are a reliable guide to truth.

Notice that they do not care why Jesus did it, or whether they may have done something wrong - to them it is strictly a question of who is 'in charge'. It is easy for us to fall into this habit also; yet genuine gospel ministry will always require patience and forbearance, not authoritarian or legalistic leadership. Jesus, for his part, could easily have performed a spectacular miracle that would have humbled them, but he chooses not to do so.

Instead, Jesus makes a new point, with his claim that he could rebuild a destroyed temple. He knows the authorities will take it literally, and they do*. He is less concerned with answering their questions than with giving his disciples something to think about later. Jesus is essentially giving the same sign of the resurrection that he would offer later when similar demands for a sign of authority were made - calling it, for example, the "sign of Jonah" in Matthew 12:39-41 and Luke 11:29-32. Whereas he would later openly tell his disciples that he would rise from the dead, in dealing with opposition he seems to prefer putting it in more figurative terms.

* The 46 years (in their response) refers to the length of time since King Herod 'The Great' had begun renovating and expanding the temple grounds in about 19 BC. The work continued gradually for all these years, long after Herod himself was dead.

These religious authorities, though, cannot stop others from believing in Jesus (2:23-25). Many persons in Jerusalem now believe in Jesus when they see the miracles he has begun to perform. Of course, along with this come the many expectations of Jesus that different persons start to have. But Jesus does not entrust himself to any human leader or human agenda. He knows what is in a human - that is, he thoroughly understands human nature and its limitations. He does not, and never will, allow any human to control him or to tell him what to do. Instead, he loves us unconditionally, and he will always stand ready to meet our genuine needs.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why do the religious authorities ask for a miraculous sign? What would be the equivalent in our time? Why doesn't Jesus accommodate them? Why is he so obscure with his promise of the resurrection? What expectations might someone have had of Jesus at this time? What does it mean that he did not entrust himself to anyone? What were his reasons for this?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, March 2011

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THE WORD BECAME FLESH: STUDIES IN JOHN 1-10

Notes For Week Four: The Coming To Rebirth (John 1)

Jesus has shown the disciples that he is able to transform anything, from water to religious observance to human minds. Yet he has no desire to impose his power unilaterally on reluctant persons. He calls each of us to look to him and to choose whether to follow him. If we choose to follow, he further asks that we experience a rebirth, a deep change of perspective and allegiance.

Review of Recent Classes

When the world meets the Word of God, it asks questions about John the Baptist and Jesus (John 1:19-51). Those who spent time with Jesus came to understand his real importance. Jesus then began to demonstrate his ability to transform things physically and spiritually (John 2).

In transforming water into wine, Jesus demonstrated his power over the physical world. The wedding feast formed an informal yet appropriate setting. His first miracle, like the others that followed, served a practical purpose, and it was done without pretense or hype. Jesus also desired to transform human ideas of religious observance. The commerce in the temple had long been accepted as a convenience, but Jesus deliberately created a disturbance to show his disapproval. His disciples noted his zeal for his Father's house, his concern for holy things.

Jesus also desires to transform minds. When the religious officials demand proof of his authority, Jesus deliberately refrains from displaying his power, giving them only the promise of his resurrection. Later, many in Jerusalem saw his miracles and believed in him. Yet Jesus was swayed neither by opposition nor by popular approval. He knew what was inside a human being, and so he did not entrust himself to any human purpose.

Based on what we have seen in the gospel of John so far, what is important to Jesus? Despite his miraculous powers, he uses them sparingly, preferring to influence others by less forceful means. He is not interested in popularity so much as in developing closeness with those who understand who he is. He is concerned neither with opposition nor with popularity. He simply speaks and acts as appropriate, letting others form their opinions. If there is a common thread, it is that Jesus points us to his Father, just as John the Baptist consistently pointed everyone to Jesus.

You Must Be Born Again (John 3:1-15)

This well-known passage opens with Jesus being sought out by a prominent religious official. Nicodemus is confused, but he is apparently quite sincere in his desire to understand. Yet Jesus is at first evasive, and then somewhat disapproving. Jesus is not acting out of annoyance, but out of compassion. If Nicodemus is to grow spiritually, then he must adopt a brand-new perspective.

This question and answer session between Jesus and the cautious Pharisee forms the springboard for some of the New Testament's most familiar verses (3:1-3). The prominent Pharisee* Nicodemus comes to Jesus under cover of night, and makes a cautious statement of faith. He deserves credit for acknowledging something that the other religious leaders would not - Jesus' ability to do miracles strongly suggested that he had come from God.

* Literally, "a ruler of the Jews" - that is, a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. In practical terms, the Sanhedrin made most of the important decisions in the community.

Nicodemus tells Jesus that he understands this, implicitly seeking a response. Jesus' answer is at best indirect. To see the kingdom of God - Jesus assumes that Nicodemus will accept the importance of this* - a person must be "born again". In a sense, this is the perfect response to Nicodemus's opening statement. Jesus is not looking for persons who simply accept him intellectually as the Son of God, and then become satisfied with themselves. To those who do believe in him, he makes the even more challenging call to be born again, to start anew.

* Then, as now, there were many differing opinions about what the "kingdom of God" or the "kingdom of heaven" would involve. It is characteristic of Jesus that, though he frequently uses these terms, he never defines them. He does not want us to come up with a dictionary definition as much as he wants his followers to put together all of the ideas he shares. Here, in other words, he does not want Nicodemus to define the kingdom of God, but instead to realize that, whatever it may be, it requires us to be born again.

Even this simple idea confuses the learned Pharisee, who wonders how such a thing can possibly be (3:4-9). Like most humans, he has a literal perspective that makes it difficult for him to grasp spiritual truths. Like many spiritual concepts, being 'born again' is only a phrase in human language that tries to communicate a concept that the mortal mind cannot fully comprehend. It ties together a lot of important ideas - including repentance, baptism, living a new life, having a new purpose, and much more - but its full meaning is beyond any of these.

Jesus provides the seeker with more detail, indicating that this rebirth involves water and the Spirit. Since both John the Baptist and Jesus were performing baptisms*, the reference to water naturally refers to this. But Jesus' discourse on the Spirit's work completely baffles Nicodemus. The comparison of the Spirit with the wind is useful for us as well. In both cases, the effects can be seen even though we cannot, and can never, put our hands on anything tangible.

* For baptism in Jesus' ministry, see John 3:22 and 4:1-2. Although the ancient Jews had many rituals involving water (some from the Law, and others of human invention), the form of baptism performed by John, Jesus, and the early Christians was new and distinct.

Jesus does not dwell on the immediate point, but instead points out the difference between understanding earthly things and understanding heavenly things (3:10-15). Nicodemus was one of the most educated men of his community, yet he has very little ability to understand the things that really matter to Jesus. Spiritual truth is equally baffling to the educated and uneducated alike, to those the world considers wise and to those the world considers foolish. God is truly just - the gospel is equally mysterious to all, and it is equally simple for all. If we teach a 'gospel' that make it easier for some and harder for others, then it is probably no gospel at all.

Again, despite Nicodemus's obvious desire to know the truth, Jesus criticizes him for being so slow to grasp even basic truths. If he has trouble with the basic idea of being born again, then how will he believe in the really challenging concepts of Christianity? The same is true for us - if we are not willing to set aside our personal preferences, fleshly biases, and side issues, then there is no way for us to understand the deeper truths of the gospel.

In particular, anyone who follows Jesus must learn and accept the necessity for the Son Of Man to be lifted up on the cross*, in order for us to have the hope of knowing God. In Jesus' lifetime, his followers did not want to believe that their Savior was going to die. For us, it is difficult to accept that we follow a Savior who died for us, and who calls us likewise to die to our old selves.

* Jesus' mention of the snake (in verse 14) refers to the events of Numbers 21:4-9. Jesus is not drawing any detailed parallels - he is simply telling Nicodemus that the answers must be sought from above, and by looking above, as the Israelites did when seeking help using the bronze snake.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is significant about the way Nicodemus approaches Jesus? Does it affect how Jesus speaks to him? How do Jesus' comments about being born again 'answer' Nicodemus? Why does Jesus emphasize the work of the Spirit? What aspects of his teachings here are hard for us to accept? What kind of 'earthly' (or simple) things do we need to understand before we can grasp harder things?

God So Loved The World (John 3:16-17)

God's love for humanity cannot be described in terms of our limited earthly ideas of love. As familiar as this passage is, it is full of profound ideas that our fleshly minds always struggle to understand. In sending his Son into the world, God acted with exceptional graciousness, and he revealed an extraordinary level of compassion. Yet we also have the responsibility to respond.

In giving his Son to the world, God displays his love for humanity in the greatest possible way (3:16-18). God has always had the desire to give life. In his Creation he combines this desire with his love, by creating beings who can choose whether or not to obey their Creator. Yet this also makes the Creation imperfect, since sin-stained human beings cannot live in the Creator's presence by natural means. Only Jesus, God's true Son and heir*, can bring this about by sacrificing himself. To be saved through belief in the Son is neither a doctrinal exercise nor a mechanical process - it is no less than the humble awareness of God's very nature and will.

* This is what John means by the term 'only-begotten'. See the notes to John 1:14.

God's light has come into the world, but the world does not acknowledge it (3:19-21). Indeed, men love the darkness, because the darkness covers over their misdeeds. Human nature opposes anything that brings its flaws to light, and thus prefers the darkness - over time, this becomes hatred of the light. In Jesus' lifetime, enough persons hated his relentless truthfulness that they conspired to kill him. But today it is not only the pagans who hate the light. Many who call themselves Christians are only willing to follow selected teachings of Jesus that make them feel superior to others; and they do not want to listen to the rest of the gospel.

If we wish to come into the light, then we must do so altogether. We cannot select the teachings of the gospel that we like, and then explain away the rest. This is a universal struggle - no individual Christian, no congregation, no denomination wants to do this. But if we let the light shine completely upon us, if we humbly allow it to illuminate everything in our lives and everything around us, then we can be freed of our insecure, desperate human attempts to prove ourselves better or more worthy than someone else. The light shows us that everything we have comes from God, and everything good we can do is made possible only by God.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does God's gift of Jesus show us his love? How can we learn to appreciate this? Why do humans not want the light that Jesus brings? Are there aspects of it that we do not like? How do we overcome this? What is necessary for us to come into the light? What is difficult about it? Why is it good?

The One Who Comes From Heaven (John 3:22-36)

We now meet up again with John the Baptist. John has continued his own ministry, yet he retains a clear understanding of his role. He draws a clear contrast between Jesus, who comes from heaven, and himself, an earthly being who is merely Jesus' friend and messenger. John provides for us a valuable example of the faith and humility that Jesus seeks in his followers.

Even after pointing the way to Jesus, and advising his own disciples to follow the Lamb of God, John the Baptist still retained some loyal followers of his own* (3:22-26). On this occasion, their loyalty to John brings them into a doctrinal dispute with another religious authority. We are not given the details of the dispute itself, since they are unimportant. We soon see that John's disciples are really pre-occupied with their concern for the success of John's ministry. They have seen Jesus attract many of John's former followers, plus new ones. We can assume that these disciples of John are sincere, but they have really missed the whole point of John's ministry.

* John himself simply continued his ministry of teaching and baptizing until he was jailed and then executed. Some of John's disciples remained loyal to him even after he was imprisoned - see Matthew 11:2-10. A few of them apparently remained 'faithful' to John's teachings years later, as suggested by Acts 19:1-7. That passage, in fact, does not definitively answer whether John's baptism 'saved' someone, making this a favorite debating point of certain commentators who enjoy discussing issues that cannot possibly affect anyone living, so that they cannot possibly be challenged by the discussion.

The humble John remains true to his calling, assuring his followers that this is just as it was meant to be - Jesus must now become greater, and John must now start to fade from the scene (3:27-30). John describes himself as merely the friend of the bridegroom - the story is not about John; it is about the bridegroom Jesus. We too ought to learn to see our ministries and ourselves in this way. From a human standpoint, John was treated with great unfairness, as his faithfulness was repaid by obscurity and violent death. But, "for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (Romans 8:36, quoting from Psalm 44:22).

All life comes from the Son himself, not from his messengers or servants (3:31-36). We are among those who come from the earth. Our perspective is naturally an earthly one - we cannot help this, and we should not feel guilty about it; but we must allow it to humble us. God the Father loves us, and he shows his love for us through his Son, whom he loves without limit. God has placed everything in his Son's hands: Jesus alone reflects the full radiance of God, and Jesus' ministry alone offers us a chance to be cleansed of our sins, so that we can live forever in God's holy presence.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why would someone still be following John at this point? Is this bad? Can we learn anything from it? Why are they worried about seeing so many others follow Jesus? What perspective does John want them to have? How should we learn from this? Why does John use the analogy of a bridegroom? What does it mean that God has entrusted everything to Jesus? What implications does this have?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, March 2011*
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THE WORD BECAME FLESH: STUDIES IN JOHN 1-10

Notes For Week Five: Testifying For The Word (John 4)

The Samaritan woman whom we meet in this chapter provides us with a well-known example of the effect Jesus can have on someone who wants to know the truth. First we see her private conversation with Jesus, and then we can see how her faith is affected by being with Jesus. This is followed by the ways that she in turn encourages others to come and see Jesus for themselves.

Review of Recent Classes

Jesus is able to bring about transformations to physical objects, to religious observance, and to human minds (John 2). He calls us to a rebirth (John 3). To see the kingdom of God, we must be born again, just as Jesus calls the learned but literal-minded Nicodemus to give up his old way of looking at things, so that he can see from a spiritual perspective. Nicodemus is genuinely baffled, not seeing how this could be, so Jesus patiently calls him to look to above.

"God so loved the world" is a familiar phrase, yet it is much deeper than earthly love. God's compassion and his desire to give life are combined in his gift of Jesus. Sadly, many persons hate the light Jesus brings, for they do not want their weaknesses and mistakes exposed. When we come into the light, we are not made flawless - rather, we rejoice in knowing we live in grace.

John the Baptist is an excellent example of the humility that comes from allowing Jesus to be the light. Jesus is the (only) one who comes from heaven, and only he is flawless and perfectly wise. John knew that the time had come when Jesus would become greater, and John less. This is also what happens to us, if we are willing to live in the light that Jesus brings.

How does Jesus wish to use his light in this world? He wants to point us to the Father, and to do so he must also reveal our weaknesses and our mistakes. He wants to show us the world's temporary, fragile nature, so that we can appreciate the eternal life that God offers us. Jesus' own life was open to all, yet he did not give in to fleshly desires, whims, or folly as we so often do. He does not want to condemn us for being weak and foolish; he just wants to humble us.

Living Water (John 4:1-6)

John records in detail the conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman whom he meets during his travels. Jesus gradually brings her mind around to spiritual subjects, and he gives her several things to think about. The woman, after some hesitation, senses that Jesus is someone unusual, and she begins to seek out his thoughts on some important questions.

Jesus has this eventful encounter while sitting by a well* (4:1-8). He has stopped at a Samaritan town** while travelling from Judea to Galilee. Tired from the long journey - we see here an example of Jesus enduring the same kind of physical fatigue that we experience - Jesus has his disciples head into town to get some food, while Jesus rests.

* John mentions that the well went back to the time of Jacob and Joseph. "Jacob's Well" is usually associated with the land Jacob purchases in Genesis 33:18-20.

** In Jesus' lifetime, most Samaritans (descendants of inter-marriages between Israel and foreign nations) lived in the region west of the Jordan River, about midway between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee.

A Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw water, and Jesus casually and naturally asks for a drink of water. It is not a calculated tactic to try to guide the conversation, for Jesus does not need such things. For Jesus, the most mundane topics can lead back in some way to God and to spiritual truth, and so Jesus simply engages her in conversation in the most straightforward way. As they proceed, he simply ignores trivia and keeps coming back to a few important ideas.

The relation between physical thirst and natural water perfectly parallels our spiritual need to be filled by the living water that Jesus provides (4:9-15). The woman's natural curiosity at first makes her wonder what kind of Jew would freely interact with a Samaritan, given the prejudice she has certainly encountered. But Jesus ignores this, and directs her curiosity to a deeper level.

Jesus' comments about living water and springs of water confuse her, but she cannot help wanting to understand what this special water might be. Even if it is only physical water, it sounds pretty good. Soon, the conversation will turn to spiritual topics - this is, of course, thanks to Jesus' patience and wisdom in guiding the conversation there; but it also says something about the woman. Jesus has looked past the surface to see her genuinely seeking heart.

Jesus leads her into a discussion of worship, teaching her what it means to worship in spirit and in truth (4:16-26). By revealing details about the woman's personal life, Jesus convinces her that he is a prophet. With all her attention now focused on spiritual matters, the woman asks Jesus where he thinks one ought to worship, whether in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim* - a question considered very important (and sometimes controversial), especially for Samaritans.

* By "on this mountain", the woman means Mount Gerizim, near the ancient town of Shechem. Mount Gerizim and nearby Mount Ebal were the site of the ritual pronouncement of blessings and curses that God instructed the Israelites to perform upon entering the Promised Land (see Deuteronomy 11:29-30 and 27:11-13, and Joshua 8:30-35). The Samaritans considered Mount Gerizim, not the temple area in Jerusalem, to be God's chosen sacred site of worship.

Her concern with places of worship is hardly a quaint remnant of bygone times, and Jesus' response has much to teach us as well. The kind of worshipers the Father seeks are not those who seek out a special place that makes them feel religious. Nor does the father seek worshipers who worry about rules and rituals. He wants us to worship him "in spirit and in truth". He wants our minds and our hearts both involved, for true worship transcends emotion, transcends physical sensations, and transcends intellectual conviction.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Is it just a coincidence that Jesus meets this woman, or is there an element of design (either by God or by Jesus)? Did Jesus have a particular reason for starting out with a request for a drink? Are there parallel ways that we might be able to use everyday situations to teach about God? Or are we meant to learn different lessons from this passage? In what ways are we like this woman? What did Jesus most want her to learn? What does he mean by worshipping "in spirit and in truth"?

Sowing & Reaping (John 4:35-38)

Intrigued by Jesus' wisdom and his knowledge about her, the Samaritan woman eagerly returns to town and starts to tell everyone about Jesus. Meanwhile, the disciples return from their shopping - but rather than being interested in the woman, they want to make sure that Jesus gets something to eat. This simple situation, too, gives Jesus a new chance to teach them.

As the disciples return, the woman is just heading back into town (4:27-30). She has forgotten all about her errand to the well, for she realizes that this "living water" - whatever that turns out

to be - is more important. Her willingness to focus on something spiritual, instead of being pre-occupied with the needs of the moment, is a good example to us. So is her eagerness to tell others about Jesus.

She runs through the town telling everyone to, "come, see a man who told me everything I ever did." We have no way of knowing her reputation - given her background (as described in verses 17-18), it could be anything from an interesting oddball to a hated outcast - but we know that right now everyone listened to her. She has no special technique or training, just a real belief that Jesus is special and important.

John tells us that the disciples have little interest in the woman or in her conversation with Jesus - all they have to say is, "Rabbi, eat something" (4:31-38). In a sense, this simply shows their sincere care for Jesus, since he certainly is hungry and tired. But in this case, Jesus shows that they were overlooking something more important. His "food that you know nothing about" involves the chance to feed someone else spiritually. The disciples were genuinely focused on Jesus' physical needs, but in so doing they were ignoring something more important.

And this lesson has to do with them, too, for "one sows and another reaps*". Someday, Jesus will send out the disciples to reap without him being present any longer. Yet even then they will be reaping where Jesus and others have sown. Indeed, we all reap what we have not sown - in many areas of life - and we are all inter-connected, whether we notice it or not. We should never ignore anyone we encounter, and we should never take credit for the things that God gives us. These are basic principles that come with living under grace.

* Jesus describes this as a 'saying'. It is not a direct quote from Scripture, although many Old Testament Scriptures uses the ideas of sowing and reaping as parallels of spiritual principles. (A good study topic!)

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why might the townspeople have listened to the woman's testimony? What might she have said or done? Why were the disciples uninterested in her? How might we do the same thing? What kind of 'food' did Jesus already have? In what ways would the disciples reap where they had not sown? In what ways do we reap where we have not sown?

Testimony & Belief (John 4:38-54)

These two separate incidents give us two examples of persons who develop faith in Jesus. Because the Samaritan woman has so effectively created an interest in Jesus, he decides to stay in her town for a couple of days. Soon afterwards, upon his return to Galilee he is asked to heal a seriously ill youth. In both cases, Jesus' presence and his words lead help others build faith.

Jesus' conversation with the woman leads to many believers in Samaria (4:39-42). Seeing the interest from everyone in her town, Jesus changes plans and stays with them two extra days. The perspective of the new believers is interesting - they clearly value the time with Jesus personally above the testimony of the woman. Their phrasing is interesting too - "now we have heard (not seen) for ourselves", implying that Jesus' words, rather than actions, have persuaded them.

This short passage completes the story that began earlier in the chapter. John has shown us the effect that Jesus had on the woman, and then the ways that she affected others by the ways that Jesus affected her - and now it ends how it began, with the townspeople coming to Jesus himself, and being persuaded to have faith by their time with Jesus.

After this, Jesus returns to Cana (4:43-48). There is a homecoming of sorts for him, for he has acquired more recognition since the last time he was near home*. Yet we sense here, as at other times** when Jesus is near home, that Jesus perceives a lack of deep faith. For, when the royal official presents him with the request to heal his sick son, Jesus' first response is the comment that, "unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will never believe."

* Once more this incident does not exactly parallel anything in the other gospels, though it could be from roughly the same time period as Luke 4:14-30. Again, see the suggested commentaries for more details.

** See Matthew 13:53-58 and Mark 6:1-6, as well as Luke 4:23-24 from the passage mentioned above.

From anyone else, this would sound cold and cynical. But coming from Jesus, we know that he is sincerely disappointed with the lack of faith he finds in those who know him best. Yet we can do the same thing. Jesus' life and teachings can easily become so familiar that we drift away from a personal closeness with him. If Jesus, his death, and his resurrection ever become mere doctrines to us, then we miss the entire point of the gospel.

But there is one group of believers in Cana, resulting from Jesus' healing of the official's son (4:49-54). After commenting on the lack of faith he has often encountered, Jesus does not grant the man's request to come with him, but simply tells him that he may go home, for his son will be well. The father accepts this, and Jesus' words are confirmed when good news arrives on the man's way home: the boy is well, and he recovered exactly when Jesus had said he would.

We know that this is no coincidence, and indeed the official and his servants realize this too. Yet we should pause to take note of this father, for he too is testifying to us about Jesus. We often read the things that Jesus says - about how we should treat others, how we should trust him, the things we should leave to him - and we do not take him at his word. We fixate on minor factual matters and fail to put into practice the more important spiritual principles. And when God helps us out of trouble, we too often see it as the result of our methods, our zeal, or our intelligence. This humble, faithful official provides us with a helpful and convicting example of genuine faith.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What convinced the Samaritan townspeople to believe in Jesus? What should we learn from this? Why does a prophet 'have no honor in his own country' (verse 43)? How did this affect Jesus? Why does Jesus respond to the royal official with a comment about lack of faith? When Jesus tells him to go home, how might this parallel other things he tells us or calls us to do? What else can we learn from this father's example?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, March 2011

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THE WORD BECAME FLESH: STUDIES IN JOHN 1-10

Notes For Week Six: The Word's True Authority (John 1)

When Jesus returns to Jerusalem, his ministry hits full stride. His teachings and actions become increasingly bold, and the opposition he arouses is ever stronger. He demonstrates his authority as the Word of God in more and more ways. This tells his listeners what they need to hear, and it increasingly points them to his Father, giving his Father all of the glory and praise.

Review of Recent Classes

Jesus issues a call to spiritual rebirth (John 3). As the Word, he testifies for his Father, and he inspires others to do so (John 4). In his "living water" discussion with the Samaritan woman, Jesus uses the imagery of physical thirst and physical water to parallel our spiritual thirst for God, and the spring of living water that can provide eternal life. Jesus also teaches the woman about God's desire to be worshiped in Spirit and in truth, rather than at a special physical place.

Jesus also uses imagery of sowing and reaping. The woman brings her whole town to, "come, see a man who told me everything I ever did." When Jesus' disciples worry about him, Jesus explains that he has "food" - his Father's work - they know nothing about. Indeed, they themselves will often reap the benefits of seed sown by others. Two examples of testimony and belief follow. The Samaritans can now tell the woman that, "we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world." Then, in Cana, Jesus declines to come with a man whose son is deathly ill. Instead, he tells him, "you may go - your son will live." By accepting this and finding that Jesus spoke the truth, this man testifies to his faith without words.

These examples show us events both mundane and dramatic that point to God. How can everyday events in our own lives point us to our need for God? Even the simple needs in life - food, water, air - should constantly remind us of our dependence on God. As with the events at the well, they can also show us that we have parallel spiritual needs that are even greater. Life's "crises" should also help us to see the world and our lives from a more spiritual perspective. This world and everything in it is perishable and fragile. Only God is permanent and immortal.

The Authority to Heal (John 5:1-15)

In healing the paralyzed man by the pool, Jesus claimed authority not only over natural forces, but also over standards of religious observance. His compassionate act of healing in no way violated God's law of the Sabbath, but it did conflict with the policies of the religious authorities. It also reminds us that Jesus has authority to forgive sins, even when we may not wish him to.

Jesus' question to the paralyzed man by the pool, "do you want to get well?", is another reminder that Jesus seeks those who understand their need for him (5:1-6). This particular man had been waiting* for 38 years to have the chance to be healed of his severe affliction.

* Some manuscripts include a legend about the pool being visited occasionally by an angel. We do not know the origin of this legend, or how it was included in some versions. It is interesting, but inconclusive.

For Jesus to say, "pick up your mat and walk" (5:7-9a), might at first seem naive or insulting. The man could hardly have expected healing to come so easily or quickly after all those years of

misery, and yet he is willing to do as Jesus says. Once more a person of very humble status demonstrates the kind of faith Jesus seeks. He is cured at once, and walks off carrying his mat.

There are two possible ways of learning from the healing (5:9b-15). The religious authorities* 'learn' the wrong lesson. They are fixated on their Sabbath regulations, which prohibit carrying a mat**. Because Jesus had told the man to carry it, the officials want to 'set him straight'. Such a perspective is laughable - overlooking the wonderful healing and the compassion it shows, and fixating on a trivial rule - yet it is no worse than our own frequent lapses into worldly thinking.

* This is what "the Jews" means (also in verses 16 and 18). It does not refer to the Jewish people as a whole, merely their leaders. We also often say that such-and-such nation has taken a certain action - it does not mean that the entire country is doing it, just that its leaders have done a certain thing.

** There is nothing in the Law against physical actions *per se*. The Sabbath prohibition against work was directed not against actions in themselves, but against the intent to pursue one's own interests without rest.

The grace of Jesus is so strong that it makes all of us uncomfortable. We ourselves can struggle with accepting the grace that God gives to those whose offenses seem especially horrible or disgusting to us. It will always be easy to find pretexts for rejecting or denying the grace that he gives to the wicked and despised of the world. But it is always important to bring our thinking back to the forgiving and compassionate mind of Christ.

Jesus teaches the healed man the right lesson. Characteristically, Jesus addresses him bluntly, telling him not to sin so that 'something worse' doesn't happen. He is not trying to frighten him, but is simply calling him to be humbled by God's power and authority. Instead of worrying about the authorities' fussing, the man should do his best to live for pleasing God. Instead of fearing further illness, he should consider his need for God and his dependence on God.

This healing is a heart-warming and encouraging act of grace. What a joy it must have been to be relieved of suffering after all those years. Yet the man eventually passed away, and he has been dead now for many centuries. His spiritual condition is now a lot more important than his physical health. We would do well to contemplate the implications of this for ourselves. Our physical needs should remind us that we have even more serious spiritual needs. God's grace in caring for our physical needs should convince us that he is even more eager to heal our spiritual wounds. He loves giving physical life, but wants even more to give eternal life.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Jesus ask the man if he wants to get well? How might the man have taken this? Why might the man have been so willing to try to get up? When we see the authorities criticize the healing, what should we learn from it? What did Jesus want the man to learn? What worse things was he warning him about?

The Son's Authority To Judge (John 5:16-3)

In the aftermath of the healing by the pool, Jesus encounters opposition from the religious authorities. They are still critical of his activities on the Sabbath, and they are even more displeased with his claims to be God's own Son. Jesus takes these thoughts, and explains the inherent closeness between Father and Son - not just theologically, but also in practical terms.

Jesus responds to their fussing about the Sabbath by reminding them that God is always at his work (5:16-18). He is referring here not to the Creation, which ended with the Sabbath, but rather to God's ongoing work of sustaining life and meeting needs. Do we really want God ever

to stop doing this? But the religious authorities - like many of us from time-to-time - have forgotten this because they are fixated on their own preferences and agendas.

They are further offended by the truth when Jesus openly claims God as his Father. Their objections may have a genuine theological component, but their displeasure is mostly practical. They are very unhappy with the thought that someone could take away their jealously-guarded right to be the dispensers of truth and right. To some degree, we can understand this, because it is instinctive in all of us to be anxious when we hear things we consider to be false or misleading. Yet it is always more important to put our faith in God's truth, not in our own thinking - and this also can give us comfort even when others truly are going astray.

The relationship between the heavenly Father and his only-begotten (or, one and only) Son is of significance to us in many respects (5:19-23). Jesus reminds us that the Son can do nothing by himself (in John 12:49, he indicates that the Son doesn't even say anything by himself). This is not because of a legal requirement, nor is it because Jesus fears his Father's anger. Rather, it is because Jesus and his Father are so close that the perspective of one is the perspective of the other, and the power and wisdom of the Son are exactly the power and wisdom of the Father.

Jesus also makes the remarkable statement that God the Father has entrusted all judgment to him, the Son. In other contexts, Jesus says that he judges no one (see John 8:15-16, 8:50, and 12:47-48)*; so what does he mean? This is the kind of spiritual topic that causes us to draw all kinds of erroneous conclusions if we try to analyze the issues forensically.

* The Greek words in all these passages are the same, so there is no subtle distinction in the text - sorting out the distinctions Jesus makes is entirely a matter of context. The verb used in all these passages is κρίνω ("krino"), which has roughly the same usage in Greek as our English word has. The Greek word used here for judgment is a form of this verb: κρίσις ("krisis"), from which we get our word crisis. Originally, a crisis meant a situation that reveals - or 'judges' - our true character or nature.

Put simply, what Jesus says here is that his Father does not judge anyone by arbitrary standards - we shall all be judged by our responses to the person, nature, and ministry of Jesus. Elsewhere, Jesus emphasizes that he himself is not going to do any personal judging. He is going to teach the truth, and we will then have the responsibility to respond. In a sense, all of these passages are implying that in a way we are going to 'judge' ourselves by our reaction to the gospel.

Jesus offers those who believe an opportunity to cross over from death to life (5:24-30). Later he will prove his authority over physical death, yet even this will only serve to demonstrate his power to prevent spiritual death, which is even more important. Someday, all of the dead will hear his voice at once, and there will be no more doubt about Jesus, his Word, or his authority. Yet in a sense, we who today are spiritually 'dead'* are hearing his voice too, and the question is different - will we take full advantage of his gracious offer of life from the dead.

* Rather interestingly, some commentators interpret verses 25-29 as referring strictly to the spiritually 'dead' and the chance Jesus gives them to be reborn. They take this viewpoint because they are worried about Jesus saying that the time has already come (verse 25) when the dead will hear his voice. To preserve the literal meaning of this phrase, they interpret 'dead' and 'grave' figuratively! The real point is that here is another passage that simply defies our attempts to interpret Scripture literally and forensically.

Jesus also works exclusively to please the One who sent him. By contrast, these religious leaders are not close with God, and so they seek to please themselves or those humans whose favor they seek. Indeed, this is the natural tendency of all of us. Only if we seek the same kind of personal closeness with Jesus - through prayer, reading his Word, meditation, and more - can we hope ever to rise above this strong fleshly tendency, even for short periods.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why do Jesus' Sabbath actions upset the religious leaders? Why are they upset when he calls God his Father? Are these the real issues? What does this tell us about ourselves? Does Jesus' reply answer their concerns? What does he tell us about his relationship with his Father? How is this an example to us?

The Source of Truth & Light (John 5:31-4)

As Jesus continues to instruct the religious authorities, he brings out the contrasts between their perspectives and God's viewpoint. They see the same facts about John the Baptist, about Jesus, and about the Scriptures, yet they draw different conclusions. Because they are too concerned with human standards and human authority, they have great difficulty seeing divine truth.

Since the religious officials considered valid testimony to be important in any proceeding, Jesus enlightens them on this (5:31-36). John the Baptist, for example, gave testimony in favor of Jesus, and there was no reason to disregard him. John enjoyed a wide following for a time, but most persons simply found him interesting or 'controversial', and never listened carefully to him.

Yet even John's testimony is not essential to the 'case' for Jesus being the Son of God. The testimony of Jesus' own ministry says a great deal about him. By this he means not only the miracles, but also the compassion and wisdom that characterize everything that Jesus does. So too, his refusal to cater to human desires and arbitrary leaders also testifies that he did not come to pursue earthly goals, but rather that his kingdom is not of this world.

The testimony of Scripture also confirms Jesus' relationship with his Father in heaven (5:37-40). These individuals have a great deal of factual knowledge about the Scriptures, but they actually understand very little. The Old Testament* is full of material about the Christ, or Messiah - not only factual prophecy, but indications of his purpose and priorities. Yet Jesus has to tell these so-called leaders that God's word does not dwell in them - and this despite their diligent study.

* There was a general awareness that the Hebrew Scriptures provided only the foundation, and that God's plans for Israel would be brought to completion through the Messiah or Christ. The widespread failure to accept Jesus as the Messiah was not due to a lack of factual knowledge, but rather it came from not appreciating that his ministry of forgiveness and grace was all-important (and was always meant to be).

Scripture emphasizes spiritual perspective, not facts or methods. If we wish to avoid falling into the error of these persons, then we should always remember that the Scriptures above all testify about Jesus - and Jesus, in turn, is above all about forgiveness, life, and compassion.

Faulty perspectives gave these officials a false security in the law (5:41-47). Jesus had truly come in his Father's name, but they listened to persons who pursued human agendas. Even their hero Moses, in a sense, accuses them of error, since he knew the limitations of law. The Word of God - written, spoken and otherwise - is always in harmony with itself. The goal of everything God ever did with Israel is the same goal that he has for us: the cross and the empty tomb.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does testimony matter here? Should it matter to us (if so, how)? What testimony does Jesus claim for himself? How is it valid? How could someone study Scripture diligently and still misunderstand or misuse it? How can this example teach us? How does Moses testify about Jesus? What does this mean to us?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, April 2011
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THE WORD BECAME FLESH: STUDIES IN JOHN 1-10

Notes For Week Seven: The Word Overcomes The World (John 1:1-10)

Jesus continues to demonstrate power and authority over everything in this world. Yet he never displays his authority for its own sake. Every time that Jesus performs a miracle, there are other purposes in addition to the display of power itself. The feeding of the five thousand, for example, is a characteristic act of compassion that also teaches some important spiritual lessons.

Review of Recent Classes

Jesus words, actions, and influence on others all testify that he is the Word of God (John 4). Jesus also brings with him the Word's true authority (John 5). The healing by the pool shows his authority to heal both physically and spiritually. In telling the paralytic to pick up his mat and walk, Jesus parallels his call for us to follow him. While the religious officials fuss over the details of the healing, Jesus encourages the man to learn the real lesson: we have needs even more crucial and more persistent than any physical ailment or problem.

As the Son of God, Jesus has the authority to judge. His relationship with the Father is visible in all he does and says. It enables him to call humans to cross over from death to life. He is the source of truth and light, in a sense that the religious authorities neither understand nor accept. Jesus details how John the Baptist, God the Father, and Jesus' own ministry give valid testimony for him. Finally, he has the testimony of Scripture. But these religious leaders have diligently studied the Scriptures without having any real understanding of what they read.

Jesus' relationship with his Father is central to his ministry. So far in John, what qualities of God have we seen reflected in Jesus? We see his power over physical forces, his authority to teach, and Jesus' confidence to speak the truth without being swayed by intimidation or manipulation. But beyond that, we see what God values. We have seen that Jesus prefers to be with weak outcasts who want to know God rather than with self-important persons. Also, Jesus - and thus God - wants to give life, healing, and help to those who need it, whether they 'deserve it' or not.

The Need for Food (John 6:1-10)

The feeding of the five thousand is not only a great miracle, but also another memorable parallel of our spiritual situation. The crowd's physical hunger is much like the spiritual hunger that fills this earth. Jesus' desire to feed them physically is surpassed by his desire to feed starving souls. The disciples' feeling of helplessness is much like our own, when we look at the world's needs.

Being followed by a great crowd is, in itself, not unusual for Jesus (6:1-4). This time, they have sought out Jesus* because of the miracles he has performed - some perhaps have come hoping to have their own needs met, while others may simply be hoping to see a miracle for themselves.

* The account in Matthew 14:12-21 places this right after Jesus has received the news of John the Baptist's death. See also Mark 6:30-43 and Luke 9:10-17 for other parallel accounts.

This crowd appears suddenly, as Jesus is sitting with the disciples, seemingly having hoped for a little privacy (see also the note above). And yet Jesus never turns away anyone in need solely because he has other matters to attend to, or simply because it is an inconvenient time.

Apparently it was clear to Jesus and his disciples that this crowd was going without food, and so Jesus asks Philip to suggest where they might be able to buy enough bread for everyone (6:5-9). We have seen Philip's eagerness and enthusiasm in John 1:43-46 - but this time Philip gives a pessimistic appraisal of the situation, focusing primarily on the enormous amount of money* that it would take to buy food for such a crowd.

* In the original text, the amount of money that Philip mentions is 200 denarii. A denarius was a common coin that at this particular time was often the standard daily payment for an average laborer. For this reason, the NIV translates the amount as, "eight months' wages", while other versions may try different approaches to communicate the value of this amount.

Jesus had asked this only as a kind of test, to see what Philip and the other disciples might say. And so he also allows Andrew to speak up too. No doubt trying to be helpful, Andrew has found a boy with a few barley loaves* and a couple of small fish. He probably thinks that his own effort verges on desperation, but instead he has given Jesus the opportunity for one of his most celebrated miracles. This small amount of food will prove to be more than enough, thanks to the divine power and compassion that are combined in Jesus.

* The 'loaf' referred to here is smaller and more compact than what we would refer to as a loaf of bread, so a boy would not have found it difficult to carry a few 'loaves' around with him.

The world is always full of needs; and we humans, no matter how faithful, have little ability to meet them on any noticeable scale. Humanity has never-ending physical needs, some natural and some caused by our own carelessness or even our ill-treatment of one another. Yet as before, the spiritual needs run even deeper. Every human soul needs direction, purpose, love, nurturing, attention, and many other such things. The true answers to these problems are not found in methods or doctrines or programs, but in bringing suffering souls to Jesus, to let him work his miracles with whatever small scraps we supply him with.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Find other times when Jesus is faced with a crowd that he did not seek out. What can we learn from these occasions? How is Jesus 'testing' Philip and the others? What might the disciples have thought? How are the crowd's needs parallel to needs around us? In what sense can we allow Jesus to meet their needs?

Enough for Everyone (John 6:1-13)

Faced with a need that seems impossible to meet, Jesus uses his transforming power to give bread and fish to everyone who needs it. This miracle is one of the few episodes in Jesus' ministry that is recounted in all four inspired accounts of the gospel, and it must have made quite an impression on everyone. Yet its most important lessons lie beyond the miraculous aspects.

Jesus doesn't make any ceremony about distributing the food, so we really can't tell how soon everyone realized what was happening (6:10-11). He has them sit in groups on the grass, to make sure that the feeding is done in an orderly fashion. This also makes it clear who has eaten and who hasn't. Jesus is able to feed everyone with the tiny amount of food he was given by the helpful boy whom Andrew had found*. Once again, Jesus demonstrates power and authority over natural forces, and once again he uses his power to perform an act of compassionate service.

* Even more so than some of the other miracles, the 'feeding of the 5,000' (and also Jesus walking on water, below) has attracted the attention of skeptical commentators who seek rational explanations for the

phenomenon. It is interesting that they do not deny the result, but only seek to explain it differently. So far, their efforts have been desperate enough that they are not really worth the effort to refute in detail.

But the miracle also extends to the leftovers of this large meal (6:12-13). Jesus makes sure that this is noticed when he instructs his disciples to make sure that nothing is wasted. We do not find out what they eventually did with the leftovers, but we do see that there are twelve baskets full of pieces left over. The exact number is not significant - the point, rather, is that they now have much more than they started with. The situation has been completely transformed by Jesus' power and compassion working together.

* Jesus makes this point to the disciples in Mark 7:14-21, when he reminds them that something similar also happened during the feeding of the 4,000 (which came just a little later). He has them recall the numbers of baskets in each case, not because they have any numerological significance, but rather to emphasize that he could produce enough not only to feed everyone, but also to have a great deal left over (the passage in Mark explains why this point is important in context).

Once more, there are some important spiritual parallels. Just as the human needs around us are so over-abundant as to make us despair of meeting them, so also the grace and mercy of God are available in overflowing amounts. Jesus' power and his compassion combine in the feeding of the 5,000; and they also combine in the availability of his grace to the entire world. The things our flesh desires are available only in limited amounts; but there is no limit to the availability of the grace and mercy that our souls and spirits need so badly.

Worldly persons always compete, debate, and fight with one another for the world's treasures; and for those who seek fleshly rewards or distinctions, it must always be so. There simply will never be enough material objects or positions of prominence or fame or popularity to satisfy all of the humans who desire them. But there is plenty of grace to go around. We need never compete with anyone for God's grace and love. The corollary to this is that anything we have to compete for, anything that can only come at the expense of others, does not come from God.

Thus, as we learn to value the things that come from God, we can also gradually relieve ourselves of the need to compete with others. We can begin to learn to live without jealousy or envy. And we can help others to do the same - but it starts with the appreciation of Jesus' grace, compassion, wisdom, and power, not our own. We also need some patience - there are times when we have to 'sit on the grass' and wait our turn while Jesus takes care of others.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Is there a particular point to having the crowd sit down in groups? Is it for purely practical reasons, or for some other reason as well? What is accomplished by having the disciples pick up the leftovers? Is this purely practical, or for some other purpose too? Can we find parallels to this in our lives? How can we learn to have more confidence in the abundance of Jesus' grace?

After The Miracle (John 6:14-4)

A number of things happen after this miraculous scene. The crowd overreacts, inducing Jesus to slip away from them. This in turn separates him from the disciples, which leads to a new display of miraculous power. Then, the next day, the crowd is still intent on finding Jesus. Yet in most cases their reasons for seeking Jesus are different from the things he wants them to value.

Surprisingly, Jesus follows up an amazing miracle by withdrawing into the hills (6:14-15). Although he thus passes up an opportunity to teach the crowd further, he is all too aware that

many of them have learned the wrong lesson from the miracle. They want Jesus to become their king*, not in the spiritual sense that he wishes to rule, but as an earthly ruler who would have the power to fulfill all of their pent-up desires and agendas. Jesus could in fact easily fill this role, but that it is not why he came to earth. He knows further that it would not really be a true blessing for them if he were merely to give them what they desire. Jesus loves us enough to offer us what we really need, even when we don't appreciate it.

* Although the situations are much different, there are a couple of parallels with 1 Samuel 8, where the people of Israel reject the informal leadership of Samuel and demand a conventional, powerful king.

By the time Jesus is ready to rejoin the disciples, they have rowed partway across the Sea of Galilee; so Jesus takes a little walk to go out and meet them (6:16-21). Walking on the water is something of an unusual miracle for Jesus, because it does not directly benefit anyone except himself. As with all the miracles, though, it is based on a practical need, rather than being a display of miraculous power for its own sake.

Yet this miracle at first frightens the disciples*, rather than encouraging them. So it seems to have been done mostly for the disciples' spiritual instruction. Their fear is eventually relieved, and they are left with another vivid memory of Jesus' authority over the natural world.

* John does not include Peter's short-lived attempt to walk on the water himself - see Matthew 14:22-33 and Mark 6:45-52. (Luke does not mention Jesus walking on the water.)

By slipping away after feeding the crowd, Jesus has not entirely avoided them, because they now continue to search for Jesus (6:22-24). When the crowd returns to the scene the following morning, they are confronted with a mystery. They know that the disciples had taken the only available boat, and yet Jesus is not there either. So the determined crowd gets hold of some boats of their own, and continues their search.

Of course, we like to see a group of persons so eagerly interested in Jesus. But the last part of the chapter will reveal that their motives are at best mixed; and they will be displeased at what Jesus tells them. But they are little different from us. We have all kinds of reasons for seeking Jesus, and all of them are all right as long as we are willing to set them aside whenever Jesus points out something more important. Indeed, as in this account, Jesus deliberately raises our awareness of his power by meeting needs that we were aware of - in the hope that we will then listen to him when he speaks of more important things.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why did the people respond to the miracle by wanting to make Jesus king? Why didn't Jesus want this? How might this situation parallel our own responses to Jesus? What purpose did walking on the water serve? Why were the people so persistent in seeking Jesus? What should we learn from this?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, April 2011

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THE WORD BECAME FLESH: STUDIES IN JOHN 1-10

Notes To Week Eight: Resist^{ance} To The Word (John 6:1-14)

The crowd that watched Jesus feed the five thousand now catches up with him, eager to see what he will do next. But instead of capitalizing on this sudden popularity, Jesus teaches them some difficult lessons. As deeply as he cares about our physical needs, he knows that it is even more important to teach us about our spiritual needs - even when we do not wish to hear about them.

Review of Recent Classes

As the living Word of God, Jesus comes to earth with true authority, not arbitrary human power (John 5). Jesus the Word overcomes the world, both by his actions and by his teaching (John 6:1-24). Jesus shows this when he meets a large crowd with a great need for food. To point out that their needs are desperate by human standards, he asks the baffled disciples where they might be able to buy enough bread for everyone. This has a spiritual parallel, because we are humanly incapable of meeting the world's most important needs.

Jesus takes a small food supply and miraculously turns it into enough for everyone, with more left over than they had started with. Spiritually, just as Jesus took almost nothing and met everyone's physical needs with plenty to spare, so also he took the horror of the cross and turned it into enough grace to heal the sins of the whole world. We never have to compete for God's favor, grace, or mercy, because he loves us enough to offer all of us more grace than we need.

After the miracle, a new chain of events begins. Seeing the miracle, the crowd wants to make Jesus king, hoping that he will fulfill all of their desires and ambitions. But Jesus withdraws into the hills, while the disciples row across the lake; and later on Jesus takes a walk across the lake to catch up with them. This miracle is another vivid reminder of Jesus' nature and identity.

What spiritual needs can Jesus meet in us, without limit? God meets our physical needs, and he is able to meet all of our soul's needs. There is no limit to the grace, mercy, wisdom, and compassion available for us. If we learn to re-adjust our priorities and perspectives, and learn to look to God and not to the world for these things, then we can start to see what a blessing this is.

The Bread of Life (John 6:5-4)

Because the miraculous feeding of the five thousand is fresh in the minds of the crowd, Jesus uses the imagery of bread and hunger to parallel our spiritual need for God. In teaching this, he is well aware that the crowd is much more interested in physical satisfaction. Thus it is no surprise that they are somewhat disappointed, and soon they begin grumbling about him.

When the persistent crowd finds Jesus again, he exhorts them to seek food that endures, rather than focusing all their attention on temporary things (6:25-29). Jesus knows that they are looking for him because they see him as a means to have their desires fulfilled: "because you ate the bread and had your fill*." Jesus was happy to fulfill their need for food, whether they 'deserved' it or not, because he cared for them. Yet precisely because he cares for them, he now will not give them what they desire - he will give them what they need.

* And they were present for this miracle because they had seen his earlier miracles, and sought him out.

When Jesus tells them to seek imperishable things, the crowd's response is natural, and revealing. They want to know what they 'have to do' to please God. Jesus responds that, "the work of God is this - to believe in the one he has sent" and thus he exactly answers them, though not as they expected. They cannot do enough good works to earn God's favor or to deserve the blessings that God wishes to give them. They can only believe God's Son and accept his blessings by grace.

The crowd does not wish to pursue this concept, though, and instead hopes for Jesus to give them bread from heaven - which he in fact will do, but in an unanticipated way (6:30-34). They were hoping for manna*, as in the days of Moses when God miraculously fed the Israelites each day. But Jesus is calling them to rise above earthly and physical needs, so that they can appreciate the true bread from heaven - Jesus' body - that will meet the deeper needs of their souls.

* Although manna was not actually bread, it was most often thought of as a kind of bread, or at least thought of as bread-like. Exodus 16:31 and Numbers 11:7-9 describe manna, which was actually so unique that the Israelites simply called it by a Hebrew phrase that means, "what is it?"

Instead of promising to fulfill their earthly desires, Jesus offers the crowd the promise of lasting fulfillment through knowing him (6:35-42). He could give them more food and water, but they would become hungry again soon enough. Even the divinely-sent manna could fulfill someone's needs only for a day. Jesus was always pleased to meet such needs anyway, just to show that he cares about us. But his real ministry was to fulfill our soul's needs, so that we would never need to be hungry or thirsty spiritually. In particular, the promise of eternal life* assures us that our true selves cannot be confined to the identities we have on this earth.

* Note that the crowd has no inherent objection to the idea of eternal life. It is a misconception to think that the ancient Jews did not believe in eternal life - only certain groups of Jews questioned or denied eternal life and spiritual reality. The Old Testament lacks a comprehensive 'doctrine' of an afterlife, but it is full of indications of the awareness of eternal life.

But the crowd does not appreciate this*. Since Jesus is not going to focus on the things they are interested in, they start to grumble. They do not want to let Jesus to tell them what is important (contrast them with the woman at the well, for example), and they are irked when he does. They are Galileans, and feel they know Jesus pretty well, so they refuse to accept any supernatural claims from him. Yet we can do the same thing - we can become so familiar with Jesus and with the story of his life that we downplay the more astounding aspects of his life and ministry. Jesus is always going to surprise us, and he is always going to call us to rise above the things that consume us at a given moment. When we let him do so, we shall always be glad we did.

* Since John has previously used the phrase "the Jews" to refer to the religious leaders and authorities, it could be that only they were unhappy at this point (see also verse 52). In verses 60 and 66, we find out that eventually much of the crowd ("many of his disciples") becomes unhappy and turns away from him.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does the crowd's motivation in finding Jesus affect how they respond to him? How can we avoid doing the same thing? In what sense does Jesus allow us never to hunger or thirst again? Why didn't the crowd appreciate this? Do we appreciate it? In what sense is Jesus comparing himself with bread?

A Word Teaching (John 6:43-1)

Although Jesus is aware of the crowd's disappointment, he does not change course. Indeed, he develops the concept of the "bread of life" even further, emphasizing the call to humility and complete dependence on God. His imagery confuses and disturbs many of his listeners, and even most of those who understand him are not enthusiastic about his teaching.

Instead of allowing the crowd to influence his teaching, Jesus re-emphasizes his main point, by telling them that this bread from heaven is no less than his own flesh (6:43-52). If anyone is willing to 'eat' this bread, then he or she will never have to 'die' spiritually (or eternally). When we properly understand what Jesus is saying, then this is quite an assurance. The closer we are to Jesus, the more we embrace our dependence on his grace and compassion, the more we can experience the peace and hope that he promises.

□ Unfortunately, the crowd engages in literalistic debate about these teachings. This time, they are angrier with each other than they are with Jesus, because they have rival ideas about how someone might 'eat' Jesus. In this respect too, they are much like us - indeed, many of our own church debates involve two equally wrong viewpoints, because we too often focus on literalism, technical details, human opinions, or obscure factoids that make us feel more intelligent or more virtuous than someone else. As a result, we can have entire discussions (or write entire books, or teach entire classes) that ignore everything that really matters about gospel ministry*.

* Indeed, this very passage sometimes illustrates this. Sometimes this text is cited as a "command" to partake of the Lord's Supper, which in turn produces other discussions or debates. But this is not the point of what Jesus is saying. He is teaching something much more comprehensive and challenging, which is probably one reason why we might prefer that it just referred to the Lord's Supper. (Note also that we certainly do not "need" this passage in order to "prove" anything about the Lord's Supper - we just would prefer it to be a little more literal and a little less challenging, just as the original crowd did.)

Jesus continues to drive home his real point, now calling his flesh "real food" and his blood "real drink*" (6:53-59). Following him involves no less than "feeding" on him. To learn from him, we must see and accept our need for his grace and his mercy; and we must see and accept our own inability to gain his favor through wisdom or righteous acts. Further, he is less interested in perfecting our lives in this world than he is in showing us the way to live forever. Here too, Jesus' will often conflicts with the will of our flesh - but it coincides perfectly with the needs of our souls and spirits.

* Literally, "true food" and "true drink".

It is at this point that many of Jesus' followers - not just the leaders or authorities - have heard enough, and they decide to turn back (6:60-71). Many of his would-be disciples (followers or learners) simply cannot accept this kind of relationship with him. They do have a certain level of faith, for they have learned from his power and authority, and they believe that he can do more than they have seen already. But they stumble when it comes to letting Jesus use his power in the way he wants to use it, rather than the ways they think he should use it.

Characteristically, Jesus does not plead with anyone to stay. Indeed, he directly asks the Twelve whether they too are going to turn away. Not for the first time, Peter shows that, despite his many weaknesses and mistakes, he has some valuable spiritual qualities. He knows that Jesus offers the kind of true life, eternal life, that he will never find anywhere else. Yet even among the loyal Twelve, we have Judas, who later will betray Jesus. There simply is never a "level" of faith at which we can cease being completely humble and dependent on Jesus. To follow him faithfully means that we can never reclaim lordship of our own lives, or indeed of anyone else's.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Jesus keep re-emphasizing his point that we must "eat" him? In your own words, what is his main point in this passage? In what ways do we see the crowd go astray in their response? Can we avoid making the same mistakes? Why does Jesus even question the willingness of the Twelve to remain loyal?

Jesus The Celebrity (John 7:1-13)

By the time that the Feast of Tabernacles arrives, Jesus has become a kind of celebrity, the subject of much comment, speculation, and controversy. But Jesus is not at all interested in this kind of casual, meaningless attention. He is only interested in attention insofar as he can use it to refocus our minds on things that matter. Even his own family does not yet grasp this about him.

Jesus gets some advice from his half-brothers about the upcoming feast* (7:1-5). They have accepted that he is somehow important or at least noteworthy, yet they completely misunderstand what he is trying to do. They think that he ought to take advantage of such public functions by increasing his visibility, and reinforcing his reputation as a miracle worker. They are hardly the last, of course, to feel qualified to "advise" Jesus, or to think that he would do better to follow their human guidance.

* The Feast Of Tabernacles was the last of the autumn series of holy days. We'll look at it more closely next week - see also Leviticus 23:33-43 and Deuteronomy 16:13-17.

Jesus' perspective is, of course, quite different (7:6-10). He is not interested in fame, popularity, or celebrity for its own sake. And he is waiting for the right time to appear in Jerusalem, though not in the narrow tactical sense that today's celebrities plan out their human careers. He knows that resistance to his message is already rising, and it will continue to do so the more that he teaches the message his Father has given him. Eventually, he will have to encounter the full force of the world's hatred, when it realizes just how devoted he is to an agenda of grace and sacrifice, and when everyone sees that he will not conform himself to any human agenda.

Jesus does attend the feast, but quietly and unobtrusively (7:11-13). For most of the feast, he is much more noticeable as a topic of conversation than as a visibly active participant. Yet the discussions about Jesus are mostly unproductive. There is a lot of speculation about whether he will attend, and there is a lot of debate about his activities and teachings. Only a few persons seem yet to have any real awareness of his real message, but that will soon change.

As always, there are spiritual parallels for today. We can easily allow the world to drive not only our discussions of Jesus, but even our views of him. He does not wish us to see him as a celebrity, an opinion-maker, or an earthly ruler. Instead of trying to debate the world on its own fleshly terms, we would do better first to focus our understanding and appreciation on Jesus' ministry of grace and forgiveness. Only when we ourselves accept his perspective can we affect anyone else in a way that really helps others spiritually.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why do Jesus' half-brothers give him the advice about going to the feast? What is their view of Jesus right now? How might our view of Jesus resemble theirs? Why does Jesus decline their advice? How do the discussions about him at the feast parallel the ways Jesus is discussed today? How can we help others focus their attention on the more meaningful aspects of Jesus' ministry?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, April 2011

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THE WORD BECAME FLESH: STUDIES IN JOHN 1-10

Notes For Week Nine: Opposition To The Word (John 1:8-11)

As Jesus' teachings and miracles have become more widely known, he has attracted more followers and has also encountered heavier resistance. From time to time, this resistance hardens into direct opposition, with attempts being made to force him to stop proclaiming his message. The incidents in these passages are the forerunners of more serious such efforts later.

Review of Recent Classes

Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, overcomes the world's limitations and pitfalls by his actions and words (John 6:1-24). Yet in Jesus' ministry he continually encounters resistance to the Word (John 6:25-7:13). For those who follow him, Jesus is the bread of life. When the crowd who saw the feeding of the 5,000 hopes for more, Jesus exhorts them to seek food that endures by putting spiritual needs first. As the true bread from heaven, Jesus fed bread to the crowd because he loved them; and now he wants them to see their deeper needs, because he loves them.

Out of love and his awareness of their true needs, he presents a hard teaching. They must "eat his flesh" and "drink his blood" - that is, become dependent on Jesus to meet every need. This is too much even for many who had seen the miracle and had started to follow him - many of his disciples now turn back. Jesus has now become a celebrity, as shown by the 'advice' he receives from his half-brothers about his 'career'. But Jesus is not interested in being famous, popular, or powerful in the world's eyes. He instead focuses on sacrifice, humility, wisdom, and patience. He is uninterested in the speculation and debate about him amongst the crowds, for anyone who seeks the truth must find Jesus for himself or herself, and come to faith in spite of others' views.

Is it possible for us to have the kind of perspective on life that Jesus is teaching? It is certainly difficult, and especially so if we pay too much attention to the opinions of others. Whether we are allowing others to do our thinking for us, or whether we are debating with them and trying to convince them of our viewpoints, we are wasting time that we all could be spending with Jesus himself. Being with Jesus, though, also calls for humility - we can only learn his perspective if we allow him to teach us, rather than telling him what he ought to do for us.

Teaching At The Feast (John 7:14-31)

Once Jesus begins to speak publicly at the Feast Of Tabernacles, he becomes involved in an ongoing give-and-take with the crowds. In their responses, we can see some who are sincerely trying to understand who he is, while we see others who have already become hardened in their opposition to him. Indeed, some have already decided to use force to stop him.

When Jesus finally appears openly at the feast and starts to teach*, he emphasizes the need for his listeners to find out for themselves whether his teaching comes from God (7:14-19). He does not want to be believed solely on the basis of the miracles, and he does not want to be rejected solely because he does not fit their preconceptions of a spiritual leader.

* When Jesus said that "the right time for me has not yet come", he presumably had this plan in mind. Being seen at the beginning of the feast may have produced an unwanted kind of attention.

In particular, everyone realizes that his teachings have come without the 'benefit' of formal study with the religious experts of the day. This made him unusual, and not only in Judaism* - the formalized versions of Christianity and the other major human religions all put an emphasis on learning from human leaders and from influential human writers of the past, so that a potential teacher will be attuned to the conventions and agendas of his group.

* The Jewish teachers of the era invariably quoted earlier rabbis to 'prove' their opinions. Since there was plenty to choose from, there was never a problem finding precedents to 'prove' what someone wanted to believe. By the time of Jesus, two sources - Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai - were most often used.

But Jesus exhorts his followers to seek truth from God instead of from other humans. This would have been unsettling to many of them for the same reason it unsettles us - we become so concerned about someone 'taking this the wrong way' that we discourage others from relying on Jesus instead of human teachers. And indeed, many persons have abused the idea in order to create their own self-centered version of Christianity. But this is a risk that Jesus is willing to take, because of how much he desires to have an intimate relationship with each of us.

Most human teachers or leaders speak on their own behalf, or else on behalf of an organization they support. Their message can never be free of agendas or rationalizations, or at least personal quirks. Only Jesus is a fully reliable man of truth, for he speaks solely to please his Father.

Jesus then exhorts them to go beyond appearances in looking at the world (7:20-24). He uses the Sabbath as an example, because of what had happened the last time he was in Jerusalem. When he healed the paralytic at the pool (John 5:1-18), he attracted the wrath of the religious leaders, some of whom even wanted to kill him. The crowd has forgotten this (see 7:20), so Jesus explains how this kind of basic misjudgment so often leads religious persons astray.

His audience accepts the need to circumcise a male child on the eighth day of his life, even if that falls on a Sabbath. Yet this is for the sole purpose of following a traditional practice, with no actual urgency involved. To object to an act of compassionate healing, solely because it is on the Sabbath, is an extreme loss of perspective in the name of following rules. Yet this is no worse than our own persistence in making rules that please our flesh and trying to force them on others.

Jesus' latest discourse is met with speculation and aggression (6:35-42). Some listeners are curious to know what the religious authorities think - this is irrelevant in terms of the truth, but it is human nature to be influenced by such things. Others weigh Jesus against popular theories about the Messiah*, and decide that he doesn't stack up. When Jesus points out the fallacy of the 'know where he is from' theory, it provokes some of them to make an attempt to seize him** by force. All of these reactions, like our own similar behavior, reflect on the crowd, not on Jesus.

* It was a popular theory at the time that the Messiah (or Christ) would hide out for a time, and would suddenly appear with a band of followers to take over without any prelude (so, "no one will know where he is from"). This had no justification in Scripture, only in human logic. And it was only one of a number of popular beliefs that parallel today's many oddball interpretations of Jesus' ministry.

** The word that the NIV translates "seize" is actually the same word translated "arrest" in verse 32. Thus some versions translate both the same way. The contextual difference is that here an angry group wants to grab Jesus without official authority, while in verse 32 an arrest warrant is issued by 'legitimate' authorities.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How could the crowds know that Jesus had no formal training? Why should they find out for themselves if his teachings come from God? Does he call us to do the same thing? Why does he risk us misunderstanding this? What should they learn from his example about the Sabbath? What should we learn?

Seeing & Binding (John 7:37-53)

While some are trying to find out the truth about Jesus, others have decided to look for him in order to arrest him. With this in the background, Jesus presents a brief but memorable lesson about the living water that he offers to those who put their faith in him. While the crowds respond to this with increased speculation, the authorities hold their own discussions about Jesus.

Again we encounter persons looking for Jesus for different reasons (7:32-36). The Pharisees, disturbed by the crowd's murmurings, issue an arrest warrant and assign the temple guards* to enforce it. Meanwhile, the crowds wonder why Jesus will be with them for only a short time - thinking he is going someplace else on earth, they want to know where**. Once more, we all have different reasons for seeking Jesus, which he uses to try to focus us on our true needs.

* The temple guards were specially chosen Levites who had wide authority within the temple court area. As long as Jesus was within this small area of town, he was at risk of arrest on an arbitrary charge.

** When some in the crowd speculate that he may be going to small Jewish communities in predominantly Greek areas, they might again be comparing his plans with what they expect of the Messiah.

While the temple guards look for him, and the crowds allow their speculations to run wild, Jesus makes his "streams of living water" promise (7:37-39). He has waited until the last day of the feast, when the festivities are at their height*. The feast included a daily ceremony in which a gold jug of water was brought from the pool of Siloam to the temple; and on the last day there was a special prayer thanking God for water and asking for rain for the crops in the coming year.

* The original Feast of Tabernacles was much more restrained, a period of thankfulness and humility, as outlined in Leviticus 23:33-43 and Deuteronomy 16:13-17. Everyone was supposed to live in a make-shift shelter for the week, as a reminder of how dependent we all are all on God. By the time of Jesus, the nature of the observance had changed considerably.

So, when Jesus calls out, "come to me and drink", he again uses the situation at hand to make a spiritual point. He overtly claims to be the source of life and sustenance - indeed, this is true literally, but his primary interest here is spiritual. This same imagery had earlier intrigued the Samaritan woman, and helped her to see her need for Jesus. Now John explains for us that Jesus also has in mind the promise of the Spirit, as a key part of the overall promise of "living water"*.

* Note also that Zechariah 14:8, for example, openly associates a flow of "living water" with the Messiah.

Whether or not they understood all this, the crowds are divided in their response (7:40-44). Some, even without grasping all that Jesus has said, are convinced that he is the Messiah, or at least "The Prophet"*. Yet others reject this, drawing an ironic conclusion: they are aware of the prophecy that the Christ will come from Bethlehem (see Micah 5:2), yet they associate Jesus' home with Nazareth in Galilee. And so again we see the wide number of ways that it is possible to go astray in our conclusions about Jesus when we rely solely on our own logic and knowledge.

* In reality, "The" Prophet did not exist. See the notes to John 1:21 for an explanation.

Moreover, the religious officials are divided over Jesus and his message (7:45-53). The trusted temple guards return without fulfilling their warrant. They have never heard anyone speak as Jesus has - he never relies on arbitrary authority or credentials, never uses lawyer tricks to prove a point, and never wastes time on meaningless side-issues. Although the guards cannot be more specific, they have a strong sense that Jesus is someone who should be listened to, not arrested.

Disagreeably surprised, the frustrated Pharisees resort to insulting the guards and the crowds. Though many in the crowds are also opposed to Jesus, they lump everyone together as an ignorant mob. When the thoughtful Nicodemus questions their judgmental attitude, they insult him too. This irrationality simply masks their sad jealousy of their own prominence and power.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why did the Pharisees decide now to arrest Jesus? What spiritual struggles do they have? Why does Jesus keep saying things he knows will be misunderstood? How might others interpret "living water"? How can we understand it better? How can we avoid the mistakes of the crowds and leaders in this passage?

A Trap for Jesus (John 8:1-11)

With their attempts to use force temporarily thwarted, the religious officials decide to turn to deceit instead. They devise a situation that they think will present Jesus with two bad options, either of which will discredit him and his teachings. But Jesus responds with wisdom, grace, compassion, and truth. He thus provides us with a memorable example of his perspective*.

* There is no irrefutable answer whether 7:53-8:11 'should be' in the New Testament. It is highly possible that it is a later insertion; yet it is consistent with other passages showing Jesus' perspectives and attitudes.

In laying the trap for Jesus, the religious officials also exploit some bystanders (8:1-6). They seize a woman who has been caught in adulterous behavior, and ask Jesus what to do, being careful to quote the Law's stern provisions for such situations. They assume that Jesus will make a mistake - a harsh judgment will conflict with his emphasis on compassion and forgiveness; while pardoning her will open him to accusations of condoning a serious and unpopular sin (since the woman is undoubtedly guilty of the sin she is accused of).

Although Jesus is not really stumped by this, he avoids answering directly, busying himself in writing on the ground, building up suspense and anticipation. (Though some commentators love to speculate on what he was writing, it is utterly irrelevant - such speculation distracts from the powerful point of the passage. The absence of the equally guilty male is not the point, either.)

When they pester him for an answer, Jesus gives them a perfect reply that results in no one condemning the sinful woman (8:7-11). Knowing the hearts of his questioners, he leaves it up to them, inviting anyone to start the stoning - that is, anyone of them who is without sin himself. In so doing, he also reminds us of the spiritual danger involved in judging and punishing, no matter how guilty someone may be. The gospel teaches us to value grace above morality, and forgiveness above punishment. Jesus knows that this isn't easy, but he knows that it is essential.

He then tells her to leave her life of sin. She is not innocent, but he will not condemn her - for she may still condemn herself if she is unwilling to give up her sin. Yet Jesus does not use open threats or guilt to persuade her - instead, by an act of compassion and grace, he hopes to motivate her in a much different and more positive way. Indeed, Jesus makes it easy for her to take advantage of him - and he does the same for us. He loves all of us enough to take this risk.

Questions for Discussion Or Study: Why is this situation a seemingly effective trap? Why does Jesus consume time idly (by writing on the ground) before answering? Why is his answer so appropriate? Why can't anyone answer this effectively? Why does Jesus say so little to the woman about her actual sin?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, May 2011

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THE WORD BECAME FLESH: STUDIES IN JOHN 1-10

Notes For Week Ten: Freedom & Truth (John 8:1-44)

From now on, Jesus will be involved in a running conflict with the religious authorities. Jesus has no human authority, and he does not use his divine authority merely to win arguments. But he has the truth on his side, and with the truth comes freedom. Jesus also offers freedom to our souls, freeing them from the lies of this world and the false loyalties of the flesh.

Review of Recent Classes

When Jesus teaches the truth, he often encounters resistance to the Word (John 6:25-7:13). As he continues his ministry, it increasingly results in open opposition to the Word (John 7:14-8:11). Attempts to silence Jesus by force occur when Jesus begins teaching at the Feast of Tabernacles. When the crowds notice that he speaks without any formal study, Jesus appeals to them to seek truth only from God, without worrying about human credentials. He also urges them to look beyond appearances when they seek to understand spiritual truth.

Humans seek Jesus for various reasons, and find different things in him, usually unexpected. While many speculate about his plans and others seek to arrest him, Jesus promises streams of living water to those who come to him. This assures us of the presence of the Spirit, who can bring us into a closer relationship with the Father and the Son. The crowds and officials are both divided about Jesus; and the trusted temple guards even refuse to fulfill the warrant for his arrest.

So the religious leaders plan a trap for Jesus, trying to get him to pass judgment on an adulterous woman. Jesus at first does not answer, but when they persist, he simply says that anyone without sin may freely start stoning the woman. After his frustrated accusers leave, he assures the woman that he does not condemn her, and exhorts her to leave sinful ways behind - allowing her to determine the course of her own spiritual future.

In John, we often see the emphasis on grace that characterizes the gospel. How does grace affect those who receive it? How does it affect those who give it? Grace gives both giver and receiver what they need. It makes us all more truly human, and it helps both to develop a more godly perspective. It gives each of us the individual responsibility for our lives - and it shows us that God thinks we are worth the risk he took in allowing his Son to die for us.

The Light of The World (John 8:1-44)

Jesus brings with him an entirely different perspective on everything. In human terms, he has no authority for teaching others this perspective - his justification comes only from God. Yet we ought to listen to him, for he brings us what we most need. He never appeals to us to listen on the basis of force or legal requirement, but rather because our souls need him and need his grace.

We are saved from the world's darkness by Jesus, the light of the world (8:12-18). In the natural world, light allows us to see our way so that we do not stumble or harm ourselves on obstacles that we cannot see. Light also allows us to see the beautiful things in the world, which otherwise we might miss. So too, Jesus illuminates spiritual truths, so that we can see God's presence in the world around us, and so that we can avoid pitfalls that catch the spiritually unwary.

Jesus is again challenged about testifying for himself*, and this time he answers more tersely. Rather than detail the evidence of John, the miracles, and the Scriptures, this time Jesus rests his credibility squarely on his relationship with the Father. Because he came from his Father, and soon will return to his Father, Jesus knows where he comes from and where he is going, in a way that is not possible for the religious leaders to grasp.

* See John 5:31-40. Jesus gave his earlier audience the benefit of the doubt, by presenting earthly or tangible evidence. But now, with their hearts more hardened, he does not bring this up.

Nor is it really possible for us to grasp, as long as we live in our mortal bodies. No human being, regardless of good intentions, factual knowledge, or leadership position, can ever have even a remotely eternal perspective. This is why we must learn to be ever humble in Jesus' presence. He alone brings an eternal perspective, yet also knows exactly what it is like to live in our world.

All this is inherent in Jesus coming from above (8:19-24), and in his relationship with his Father. If we know Jesus, then we know God - an idea that we see throughout John. A new element here (in chapters 7-8) is his repeated warnings that he will be going elsewhere soon. He is returning to his Father, where he belongs eternally, and so we should get everything we can from his brief appearance here - instead of indulging in idle speculation, as some of his listeners continue to do.

Jesus also warns against the danger of spiritual death*, to "die in your sins". We can only prevent this through belief in Jesus. Meritorious actions cannot cleanse us; only belief can. And belief is not in itself meritorious; it is only through grace that belief in Jesus has any significance. Here is the real stumbling block that is faced by religious persons of every era. Nothing we can do, not even our 'correct' beliefs, can save us. Being freed from sin can come only by grace.

* In John, Jesus' references to death are often (deliberately?) ambiguous, and could refer either to physical death or to spiritual death. Here he is a little clearer in combining the importance of both.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How is Jesus "light"? Has that changed since he left this earth? Why do the Pharisees challenge his self-testimony? What should we learn from this? In what sense do we see the Father when we see Jesus? Is this true in a different sense for us than it was for his original audience? What does it mean to die in our sins? How can faith in Jesus prevent this?

Freedom (John 8:31-41)

Once more, Jesus finds at first a favorable response to his message, only to have his audience take exception when he elaborates. This time, his listeners struggle with his appeal for them to become free through the truth. Jesus values spiritual freedom above physical freedom, while the crowd takes pride in physical freedom, but cannot see that they are spiritually in chains.

As his audience's resistance to his message increases, Jesus again emphasizes that he is saying just what the Father has taught him to say (8:25-30). He is not speaking on his own behalf, and is not adapting his message based on his personal preferences. He says this in many different ways, and sometimes this is not clear to his listeners, and perhaps it shouldn't be. He is making a claim that is difficult or impossible for our mortal minds to grasp, and when we all too quickly make a show of 'agreeing' with his claims, we may well be missing their powerful implications.

Jesus also calls himself the Son of Man, and in particular he emphasizes this identity when foretelling the crucifixion. Jesus is the Son and heir of God, for all the reasons he has taught

already; but he is also the Son of Man* in that he will inherit the burden of sin that humanity has built up for centuries. He is Son of God by nature - but he is Son of Man by choice.

* The expression "son of man" is used throughout Ezekiel - see 2:1, 2:3, 2:6, 2:8, 3:1, 3:3, 3:4, and many more - in a more limited sense. It emphasized Ezekiel's mortality and his role as a prophetic representative of a sinful nation that needed spiritual discipline in order to be restored. Jesus fulfills the same roles in a deeper sense. He gave up his mortal life, and took the full burden of humanity's sin upon himself.

As Jesus explains these things, some still resist or reject his message, but many put their faith in him. What he has said so far makes sense to them, and it appeals to the needs of their hearts. So far, they are showing a good sense of spiritual priorities, and they are also willing to accept his divinity, even though this requires them to move beyond some of their own preconceptions.

Yet Jesus' call to full spiritual freedom will prove harder for them (8:31-36). He is pleased that they have put their faith in him, but this is only the start. To find spiritual truth and freedom, they must walk in humility and dependence upon Jesus and his Father. Only by accepting the whole truth of the gospel, not merely the facts, and not merely the parts that they 'agree' with, can they be fully set free from the world's tyranny and from their own fleshly chains.

The same crowd that has gladly accepted Jesus' earlier teachings now opposes this. They insist that, as Abraham's descendants, "we've never been slaves!" Even if this statement were not historically absurd*, they are still missing the point. Literal enslavement is awful, but being enslaved by sin is more hazardous spiritually. And we are all enslaved by sin until and unless we have accepted the unconditional grace of God through the blood of Jesus. Further, all who look to Jesus for salvation are all equally forgiven, regardless of what fleshly logic might tell us.

* Israel spent a great deal of its history either subject to or actually enslaved by larger nations: first in Egypt, and later by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans.

Jesus reminds them that to be Abraham's true children takes more than natural descent (8:37-41). They are indeed physical descendants of Abraham, but this is no distinction. They did nothing to attain this status - they were just born. But to follow in Abraham's steps as a person of faith, to trust God even when he teaches difficult lessons, this makes someone a true child of Abraham - regardless of whether or not someone was descended physically from Abraham.

Abraham was always willing - even eager - to hear what God said. But this crowd has no room for his Word, unless it tells them what they want to hear, or unless it backs up what they have already decided. Indeed for us it is a constant challenge to seek the perspectives and viewpoints of God, even when no human voice will support them.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In this context, why does Jesus call himself the Son of Man? Why would his teachings here induce some of these persons to put their faith in him? If they have faith in him, why do they then object to his teaching about spiritual freedom? In what ways does the truth set us free? Is this true also in a worldly sense, or only in spiritual contexts? Are we slaves? Are we children of Abraham?

Truth or Lies (John 8:4-5)

Jesus now puts things in the most basic and challenging terms. The choice between truth and lies is no less than a choice between believing God and believing the devil. Being a descendant of Abraham - or a Christian, or an American - means nothing in itself, unless it is accompanied by a willingness to seek and heed the truth even when it is unexpected or disturbing.

Jesus is astonishingly blunt in referring to his audience as children of the devil, the "father of lies" (8:42-47). In so severely critiquing their lack of spiritual understanding, Jesus shows again his relentless commitment to the truth. Again and again* we see that he will not settle for a crowd simply 'agreeing' with him, or even accepting him as the Messiah - out of his compassion for them and his respect for them as human souls, he needs to go deeper.

* Compare 8:12-59 with John 3:1-15, 4:1-26, 6:25-66, and 7:14-31. In all these cases, Jesus finds a crowd or person(s) initially responsive to him, yet instead of being satisfied with their 'agreement', he persists in calling them to look ever deeper into things they hadn't thought of.

Let us not misunderstand this. Jesus did not give anyone a detailed critique of his lifestyle or beliefs, nor did he fuss over methods or results. Instead, he persistently taught the same crucial basics of the gospel: God's holiness, our sinfulness, God's universal compassion, our absolute dependence on grace. Jesus encountered various responses to this, from the Samaritan woman's humility to Nicodemus's well-meaning befuddlement to numerous instances of angry rejection.

The devil and his prophets speak the language of lies. Factual lies are less dangerous than faulty perspective. We too often join the world's infantile debates, when we should be the ones to step back and re-adjust our priorities. We should not be so anxious about correcting errors of fact, yet we should be ready to question even the most widely held perspectives and values. Only thus can we hope to understand the gospel, for it refutes and rejects all forms of earthly wisdom.

Freedom from death is one of the truth's greatest blessings (8:48-53). Even before he openly revealed the details of his ministry of grace, Jesus made it clear that he offers something that will last beyond this earth. When we keep his Word, and begin to live as he teaches, we begin to see our need to transcend this world, and we learn the way that Jesus enables us to do so.

The crowd hates this. The very thought of Jesus offering something beyond this life provokes them to ask him, "who do you think you are?" In their minds, not even great figures of faith like Abraham could overcome death; and they persist in seeing Jesus as merely a young man* without any formal study behind him. Yet in one sense they are right, because if Jesus is merely a human philosopher or teacher, then his teachings are no more valuable than anyone else's would be. It is only because he comes from the Father in heaven that we must heed him.

* When the crowd says that Jesus is "not yet fifty years old", this is just a rhetorical expression; it does not mean that they thought he was almost fifty. They knew, as do we, that he was just a few years over thirty.

So Jesus teaches them about true glory (8:54-59). During his earthly life, he will have no glory, nor will he seek it. Real glory is found only in his Father's presence, and this can be experienced only by the purified. This in turn can come only if all sin is forgiven. This is why Jesus can say that even Abraham himself rejoiced at the thought of seeing God's Son come to this earth, because for even the greatest figures of faith in the Old Covenant, "only together with us would they be made perfect" (Hebrews 11:40). Before Abraham was born, Jesus had already been sitting at his Father's side - and Abraham was humble enough to accept the implications of this.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does Jesus keep challenging his audience when they started by accepting him? Are there any ways we should emulate this? Why does he say that the devil is their father? In what sense is the devil the father of lies? Is there anything we should learn from this? How is Abraham significant in this context?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, May 2011

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THE WORD BECAME FLESH: STUDIES IN JOHN 1-10

Notes For Week Eleven: Darkness □ Light (John □)

This chapter is an extended illustration of some themes that have arisen throughout John. After Jesus gives sight to a blind man, the healed man finds himself in a lengthy confrontation with the religious authorities. As the authorities continually try to discredit Jesus, they gradually reveal their own flaws. The blind man, though, holds up under their harassment, and grows in his faith.

Review □f Recent Clases

Despite always speaking the truth, Jesus often encountered resistance and even opposition to the Word (John 6:25-7:13). We see this again as he teaches about freedom and truth (John 8:12-59). He is the light of the world, because his truth and grace save us from the darkness of the world. If we know Jesus, we know his Father as well - Jesus brings us into a relationship with him.

We must choose between spiritual freedom and spiritual slavery. Jesus is by nature the Son of God, but by choice the Son of Man, who carried our sins with him. The gospel's truth sets us free, for only its grace and wisdom can help us rise above the world's anger, despair, and fear. But we must not make the mistake that these listeners do: they think that their heritage makes them free, and are ignorant of the chains that each of us creates in our souls because of our sins.

We must constantly choose whether to believe the truth of the gospel or the lies of those who are powerful and respected in this world. This choice will also determine our spiritual father. Believing the world's prophets will make us children of the devil, who is the father of all lies. If instead we choose God as our Father, we will need to sacrifice our worldly opinions and loyalties, but we have a greater freedom, including above all the freedom from death.

Why is it hard for us to accept the truths Jesus teaches us? Will it ever be easier? For any specific teaching, there are specific reasons - but much of it comes down to perspective. We can never understand Jesus if we worry about what the world thinks, what our flesh desires, or what will happen in the short-term. It will never be easy to resist these tendencies, but it can be much easier if we love and trust Jesus as he loved and trusted his Father. This helps us to screen out the world's folly, instead of being tempted and distracted by it.

□rom □blindness To Sight (John □:1-1□)

Even without the valuable lessons from its aftermath, this miracle presents some worthwhile lessons in itself. Besides the compassion that Jesus once again demonstrates, it is also a perfect way to answer the question that the confused disciples have just asked Jesus. Giving light to the blind is a physical parallel for the spiritual enlightenment that Jesus wants to give to us all.

When Jesus and the disciples encounter a man who has been blind all of his life, the disciples' reaction is to wonder who sinned to cause this misfortune (9:1-5). This is just a variation of a common question. It is human nature to wonder if something tragic or frightening has a specific cause, or can be blamed on a specific sin*. If we are unhappy, we wonder what we have 'done wrong'; if something good happens, we assume that we 'deserve it' for something we've done.

* In Jesus' day, most Jewish believers thought this, and many thought it was 'obvious'. Even today, many Old Testament commentators misinterpret large portions of the Old Testament, thinking that it teaches this.

Jesus' answer is often misunderstood. This man's sad misfortune is an opportunity to display God's light and God's love. This does not at all mean that God caused it, either to prove his power or for any other reason. Jesus does not really even address the question of why tragedies and misfortunes occur - he more-or-less assumes that we do not and could not understand this.

Instead, when we see others suffer, he calls us to focus on what we can do. Seeing opportunities for compassion and mercy is much more important than speculating and debating why bad things happen to others. He is hoping that the disciples will have the maturity to set aside the foolish speculation, and show compassion instead - and he will set this example himself.

In giving sight to the blind man, Jesus combines compassion with a spiritual parallel that becomes clearer later (9:6-7). Jesus also has a curious way of performing the miracle, combining his own physical action with an instruction to the man to go and wash himself, making it in effect a miracle by remote - at the actual moment of healing, Jesus was already gone. While we can rarely be certain why Jesus does different healings in different manners*, this has the practical effect of putting the man on his own when his eyes are opened. He must face the questions of his neighbors and the harassment of the religious leaders all on his own. This might have been too much for most persons, but this man will stand up well under the test.

* Other examples of healings involving more than a mere word or brief touch would include Mark 7:31-35 and Mark 8:22-26. See also the discussion questions below.

After the miracle, we see some familiar responses (9:8-12). Some are understandable - it is not surprising that the man's acquaintances would wonder whether he is the same man. Yet it would not have been too hard to figure this out, and much of the ensuing speculation and discussion was doubtlessly unconstructive. And the crowd's decision to take the man to the Pharisees for a 'decision' was uncalled for. Yet this is human nature - speculation and debate can help us to avoid spiritual responsibility; and the decisions of 'expert' opinion-makers gives us false security.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why did the disciples assume that someone had sinned to cause the man's blindness? What similar assumptions do we make? Can Jesus' answer apply to the sadness and pain in our own world? Why might Jesus have made this healing more drawn-out than most of the others? Is there any application for us?

CS- Pharisees (John 9:13-34)

The response of the Pharisees is sad yet revealing. For most of them, it is simply impossible to focus on the actual miracle or on the blessing God has given to the blind man. Because they have the wrong values, they draw the wrong conclusions. And as they interrogate the blind man, their efforts to intimidate him simply reveal their own insecurity and small-minded viewpoint.

When the situation is called to their attention, the Pharisees* treat it almost like a crime scene, demanding to know just the facts, and completely ignoring the more important aspects of the healing (9:13-17). Because the factual data is more important to them than the personal well-being of the blind man, it is almost certain that they will draw some erroneous conclusions.

* The Pharisees were one of two quasi-political, quasi-religious parties that dominated most of the debate and discussion of public issues and opinions in the Jewish community. The name Pharisee essentially means 'separatists' - they arose in the period of Greek domination between the end of the Old Testament era and the first century AD. Originally, the Pharisees arose as the result of widespread concern that too many Jewish believers were adopting Greek cultural values at the expense of their faithfulness to God.

In their convenient conclusion that, "this man is not from God", we see also that most of the Pharisees are unable to look past their own agendas and insecurities. It is of some encouragement to see that a few of them saw the compassionate miracle as the kind of thing that only God could do*. Thus they are willing to look more closely at things, but they still end up merely going over the same ground, asking the blind man the same factual questions and getting the same facts in reply. To find spiritual truth always takes more than merely the visible facts.

* In this, they are very much like Nicodemus, who also could not quite see things clearly, but who was humbled enough by the miracles to want to know more about Jesus. (See John 3:1-15.)

When the Pharisees realize that they aren't getting anywhere, they decide to look for some new witnesses (9:18-23). Unfortunately, what they need - if they are really interested in the truth - is not new witnesses, but new perspectives. Even in the secular world, a fresh look at a problem is usually a lot more constructive than digging up new factoids to bolster an existing viewpoint or theory. In Jesus, a new perspective is essential for those who want to know God.

The blind man's timid parents fall victim to the Pharisees' forensic mindset. They seem more concerned with their own security* than with their son, but they are in a no-win situation. There isn't much they can say, other than to confirm that their son was indeed born blind. The Pharisees' bullying is the kind of abuse of power common to human nature. Even believers who acquire a small bit of 'authority' are often eager to exert it, and many who do not have authority fantasize about grabbing it for themselves, or else they strive to get someone who 'agrees' with them into a position of authority. All such thinking is fleshly, and is alien to the gospel.

* The threat to throw them out of the synagogue - already indicated by the Pharisees as the penalty for anyone who believed that Jesus was the Messiah or Christ - was a severe social sanction. It would cut someone off not only from the activities in the synagogue itself, but also from many basic social connections. The parents are so afraid of this that they won't even speak up for their son, much less Jesus.

Getting nowhere, the Pharisees recall the blind man and use new pressure tactics (9:24-34). Their criticisms of the man's character and faith are cruel (as are our own similar tactics). But this behavior also shows us what the Pharisees were really like. They are not super-villains, for such a thing does not exist. They are weak, foolish, and insecure - like most of humanity.

In proclaiming, "we know this man is a sinner", the investigators show that they have already decided the issue, and all they are doing is looking for corroboration. Their insecurity starts to come out now, and by the end of the conversation, they will be exposed as petty bullies, not community leaders worthy of respect. The blind man, by contrast, simply reiterates what he knows. He does not claim to have all the answers; but the one answer he does know is powerful.

The blind man holds firm under increased bullying, even tossing in a bit of irony in asking the Pharisees if they'd like to follow Jesus along with him. This, of course, provokes a final outburst of anger and vengefulness. Although the man has done nothing to harm anyone, they throw him out of their synagogue*, viciously punishing a harmless man when they could simply have appreciated and enjoyed the grace God gave to him. The respective social positions of the blind man and the Pharisees are reversed in terms of their spiritual growth and well-being.

* Which is more severe than it might sound. See note above.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why do the Pharisees care more about the details of the miracle than about its effect on the blind man? Can we fall into this perspective? What do we see in their questioning of the man and his parents? What enabled the blind man to stay calm and faithful despite these tactics? What can we learn from him?

Rising & $\square\square$ lling (John \square :35-41)

Jesus now returns to the scene, and puts what has happened into a broader perspective. The blind man has not only been given physical sight, but has also grown spiritually. The Pharisees, intending to condemn the failure of others to follow their standards, have in reality pronounced judgment on their own spiritual blindness. Their own flaws and weaknesses have been exposed.

Jesus knows that the blind man has been mistreated and unfairly kicked out of the synagogue, yet when he finds the man, Jesus simply asks him "do you believe in the Son Of Man?" (9:35-38). Jesus' question seems at first to be insensitive, for he expresses neither sympathy nor encouragement. But, characteristically, he goes directly to the man's need. The blind man has shown that he has faith, courage, and self-control. Jesus knows what he needs next on his spiritual journey, so he gives it to him right away - and the man eagerly accepts Jesus' divinity*.

* Aside from this obvious implication, it is not possible to determine exactly what is included in the gospel account's statement that the man worshiped Jesus.

This whole sequence of events has given us a lesson in sight and blindness (9:39-41). As Jesus himself says here, his coming into the world causes the blind to see, and it shows that many of those who think they can see are in fact blind, in the way that matters most. Jesus calls this a form of judgment, as indeed it is. Jesus did not even comment on the Pharisees' behavior, because they revealed themselves for what they were. And he did not need to announce that the blind man had faith, for the man's own attitudes and actions showed that he did.

The Pharisees even judge themselves one more time. Hearing Jesus' simple statement that, "the blind will see, and those who see will become blind" - which made no direct reference to their own condition - the Pharisees cannot refrain from demanding whether Jesus is calling them blind. They are certain that they can 'see' much better than Jesus can, and they are even more certain that their beliefs and opinions are more valuable than those of a blind beggar. Whatever offenses they have committed, we can even pity them for being so deluded and miserable.

Jesus does not seek those with perfect spiritual 'vision'. He looks for those who realize they are blind, so that he can give graciously them sight. If the Pharisees admitted their blindness, he could forgive them and help them. But since they claim to 'see' well on their own, without Jesus, they are still spiritually blind, and must carry the burden of their own sin. They will always have the chance to change, but only through humility, not through debate or investigation.

So it is with us - Jesus does not expect us to be able to see things clearly on our own. Instead, he just wants us to come close to him. We need to see the folly of the world's viewpoints, no matter how 'expert', so that we can acknowledge our blindness and thus enjoy the true light of Jesus.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Jesus ask the blind man whether he believes in the Son of Man? Why does he use this term here to describe himself? Why might the blind man have responded so eagerly? Why did Jesus call these events a form of judgment? Why do the Pharisees react to his statement about sight and blindness? What is the lesson for us?

*- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, May 2011
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THE WORD BECAME FLESH: STUDIES IN JOHN 1-10

Notes For Week Ten: Shepherds & Sheep (John 10)

Jesus' description of himself as the "good shepherd" is another of John's especially memorable passages. Jesus merits our loyalty and faith in a way that human leaders never could, because only Jesus can and does meet our deepest and truest needs. Our souls know this, and they respond to his voice, even when our flesh resists the things that he tells us.

Review of Recent Classes

Just as freedom and truth are linked (John 8:12-59), the contrast between darkness and light has spiritual and practical implications (John 9). Just as Jesus gives sight to the blind man, he brings us spiritual sight. When his disciples ask whose sin caused the man's blindness, Jesus dismisses this narrow-minded question, and focuses on giving light, sight, and life as he has opportunity.

The Pharisees investigate the healing as if it were a crime scene. They are blind to Jesus' compassion, and focus on the mechanical facts of the miracle. They seek new witnesses and use pressure tactics, instead of adapting their perspective and discarding their preconceptions, which might have led them to the truth. The blind man remains calm and faithful despite their bullying.

Jesus brings about rising and falling, as Simeon once prophesied (Luke 2:34-35). The blind man now sees physically and has grown spiritually, but the Pharisees have been revealed as "blind guides" unworthy to lead others. Even now, if they humbled themselves, Jesus would give them life and light too - but their insistence on being 'right' dooms them to carry their burden of sin.

What characterizes those who respond eagerly to Jesus? What about those who oppose him? Worldly possessions do not matter much, one way or another. Neither does one's reputation, success, or popularity. One consistent theme is that Jesus brings out the difference between those who understand their spiritual needs and those who think they are "good enough" not to need the unconditional grace that he offers. Humility is essential to an understanding of grace.

The True Shepherd (John 10:1-10)

Jesus is hardly the only one who asks for our faith and loyalty. In every era, the average person is besieged by pretenders who claim to have all the answers, or who claim to care about us. In this short passage, Jesus lays out some of the things that distinguish him, the true shepherd, from the false shepherds of the world. The distinctions are both positive and negative.

Jesus mixes together several images involving sheep and their shepherds, beginning with the simple metaphor of entering by the gate* (10:1-3). The literal illustration is simple - the true shepherd simply enters the straightforward way, through the gate; but anyone who has to sneak into the 'sheep pen' cannot be the true shepherd - such persons can only be thieves or fakes.

* Soon afterwards, Jesus refers to himself as the gate (verse 7). The soundest way to interpret this passage is to treat each image separately, without trying to force them all into one detailed scenario. Jesus is simply using the similar and familiar setting of a sheep pen for a series of images that teach various lessons.

This simple image merely reminds us that Jesus appeals to his sheep by telling the sheep the truth at all times. He tells the sheep the truth about himself, about God, about their nature, about their burden of sin, and everything else. Individuals who are sneaking in or climbing in without

using the gate are trying to trick or deceive the sheep in some way, either by concealing their own weaknesses and agendas, or by making promises to the sheep that they cannot fulfill.

This is why the sheep know his voice* (10:4-6). In this case, the sheep represent not our earthly bodies but our souls. Although our minds often argue with Jesus' teachings, the soul's response to Jesus is always eager and positive. Our souls and spirits within us long to be released. They know that they must wait for a while to be released from the physical body, but they can bear this. What stifles our souls is our unwillingness to allow Jesus to determine our perspectives and priorities, when we choose to listen to worldly viewpoints instead of the values of the gospel.

* Jesus is relying on his audience's familiarity with domesticated animals, most of whom seem to have an instinct for recognizing their true 'master' as distinct from other human beings.

The sheep - our souls - do not recognize a stranger's voice, for they know intuitively that the stranger cannot meet the soul's needs. Even when our earthly natures embrace the world's perspectives and behavior, our souls do not. When we feed the flesh and starve the soul, we usually feel uneasy and frustrated. Jesus' imagery of sheep reminds us that our souls are vulnerable - they are meek, patient, and at the mercy of the flesh and its never-ending demands.

Our souls, like sheep, know that only Jesus is the true shepherd and the giver of life (10:7-10). Anyone else who claims to bring us life, regardless of the banner or slogan they use, is trying to enter the sheep pen under false pretenses. All humans are by nature sheep, and no one of us is worthy or even able to meet the deepest needs of our fellow sheep. Jesus can lead the sheep to safe pastures, but humans can at best remind their fellow sheep to follow the true shepherd.

Next Jesus gives us his promise of "life to the full". Both flesh and soul rejoice in this promise - but the flesh does so for the wrong reason*. Life to the full has nothing to do with pleasure or desire. We can see this by observing Jesus' life and the lives of the Christians in the New Testament and in the 1st century. Our example of "life to the full" is Jesus himself, who as God made flesh experienced to the full everything that life offers, both 'good' and 'bad'.

* Psalm 37:4 is a similar example of a promise that is often misinterpreted because of our earthly mindset.

More than anyone else, Jesus was able fully to appreciate the simple joys available in the world that his Father created. More than anyone else, Jesus fully felt the weight of sadness and fear that this world can instill in the unfortunate. More than anyone else, Jesus knew the full measure of joy that comes with helping someone in need. This is the nature of life to the full, and it is what Jesus offers to us. Our souls within us know that this is also what we were created to be.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Jesus so often use the imagery of sheep? How closely should we apply this image to ourselves? Why does he keep shifting the literal correlations in these images? What characterizes false shepherds? How should the sheep recognize them? What practical implications does this have for us? Why does Jesus want us to have the kind of "life to the full" that he had? Is this a good thing?

The Selfless Shepherd (John 1:11-1)

Above all, Jesus is our true shepherd because he alone knows our most crucial needs, and always seeks to meet them. He can only do this by being completely selfless, to the point of laying down his life. In this, he is again in complete unity with his Father. He was not forced to give up his life, but rather he did so voluntarily. Both he and his Father were pleased to do this for us.

The distinction between the true shepherd (Jesus) and the hired hand (humans who claim spiritual authority over the sheep) is revealed in times of trouble (10:11-13). Using the image of a wolf attack*, one of the greatest hazards a real-life shepherd would face, Jesus compares the responses to the wolf: the true shepherd will not leave the sheep even in such times, but the hired hand will have no trouble convincing himself that he should flee.

* The image of a predatory animal is sometimes used to symbolize Satan's methods. The image of a wolf attack, though, is more often used to symbolize trouble arising from earthly opponents of the church (see Matthew 7:16, Matthew 10:16, Luke 10:3, Acts 20:29). Indeed, this kind of human opposition often drives off a lot of the "hired hands."

It is in troubled times that we most need one another, yet the flesh provokes even believers to look to their own interests instead of caring for those in spiritual danger. Fortunately, even if humans ignore our needs we always have Jesus, who always listens and always cares. In Jesus' earthly ministry, he devotes special attention to the weak, the outcasts, the suffering. This is true in a less tangible way now: he desires especially to be present for those with spiritual problems. "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (Matthew 9:12, Mark 2:17, Luke 5:31).

Our souls recognize Jesus, and Jesus also knows his sheep thoroughly and intimately (10:14-16). He knows our sins and he knows our needs - and nothing will ever change that. He offers his sheep the kind of relationship with him that he, the good shepherd, has with his Father. God has always desired for us to know the closeness that humanity once had with him before the fall.

In this connection, Jesus talks about his sheep "from another pen" that he also wishes to gather. This is foremost a reminder that Jesus had come to save Gentiles as well as Jews. Once the religious leaders of his day realized this, it would be one more reason for them to oppose Jesus (and later to oppose his disciples). For us too though, it should be a reminder that Jesus does not keep all of his "sheep" in the same "pen".

Yes, it is good to watch our teachings closely, and to avoid the silly human doctrines that characterize many other fellowships. But this does not save us - and a failure to do this, in itself, does not automatically lead to being lost - everyone in any fellowship can only be saved by grace. The specific body with which we worship and minister cannot in itself determine our spiritual condition - it cannot save us automatically, and it cannot disqualify anyone either.

As the good shepherd, Jesus has the authority to lay down his life for the safety of the sheep (10:17-21). At first, this might sound odd: who would need or even want the "authority" or the "right" to sacrifice his life? But no one other than Jesus has the ability to lay down his life for the specific purpose of saving the sheep. Humans can die voluntarily for many causes, but no one other than Jesus can lay down his life for the sins and salvation of the world.

Thus the Father loves the Good Shepherd Jesus for many reasons, not least of which is that Jesus willingly lays down his life of his own accord. His will is so intertwined with his Father's will that even the physical torment of the cross, which he must bear on his own, cannot outweigh his desire for the sheep to be gathered safely to him.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Whom does Jesus consider a hired hand? Is this necessarily bad or evil? What is the point of this distinction? What characterizes the Good Shepherd? Why can only Jesus have these qualities? Why should it matter to God that Jesus lays down his life of his own free will? Why should it matter to us?

Messiah or Ishemer (John 1:1-4)

Public opinion of Jesus always wavered considerably, yet now we can see signs that it is hardening. Speculation is rampant that he may be the Messiah, while the opposition to Jesus grows more determined and more likely to use force. Yet Jesus does not respond to either. Instead, he calmly gives those who follow him some valuable assurances.

While at the Feast Of Dedication*, Jesus says of his followers that, "no one can snatch them out of my hand" (10:22-30). As we have seen him do before, when he is asked a question that he does not wish to answer, he instead teaches his audience something that they need to hear. In this case, the crowds are constantly demanding that Jesus tell them whether he is the Messiah (Christ). Because their motivation rests largely on speculation and rumor, he instead speaks to them about his sheep, continuing some of the themes from his "good shepherd" lesson.

* Also known as the Feast of Lights, or more familiarly, as Hanukkah. The name Hanukkah comes from the Hebrew verb root הִנִּיחַ ("hanak"), 'to dedicate.' It is not an Old Testament holiday - it was instituted in the 2nd century BC during the Maccabean period, as a celebration commemorating the cleansing and rededication of the temple after it was defiled by the pagan oppressor Antiochus 'Epiphanes'.

Jesus emphasizes that his sheep are safe with him, and thus they know his voice. Once the soul recognizes the grace of Jesus for what it is, the soul will not settle for anything less. And Jesus will not permit anyone to grab one of his sheep away from him - though he will allow a dissatisfied sheep to leave. He assures his sheep that they belong to him as long as they wish to, yet they are also free to leave if they really think they can find something better.

On hearing this new teaching, the crowd is ready for a stoning (10:31-39). Despite the miracles, and the ways that Jesus has met others' needs, they have convinced themselves that Jesus is a blasphemer. A moment ago they were ready to accept him as the Messiah, but now they cannot conceive of a Messiah who talks about his Father in these terms. Jesus slips away from them, not because he was unwilling to die, but because the proper time to die had not yet come.

Jesus goes back across the Jordan* to a familiar place, an area where John the Baptist once taught the crowd and introduced them to baptism (10:40-42). The persons who seek out Jesus there feel that it is like old times. They remember John fondly, and they realize that his message about Jesus - though given in words alone without miracles - was true. And so for a time Jesus remains here with those who have a little better idea of why he has come.

* That is, to the east side of the Jordan, with the river now between him and Jerusalem.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Is there any significance to the setting of the Feast of Dedication? Is it true now that no one can snatch us out of Jesus' hand? In what sense is this true? Why does the crowd now want to stone Jesus? Why can't they see that he is the Messiah? Why did Jesus decide to go back across the Jordan? Is there any significance to this 'quiet' interlude in his ministry?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, May 2011

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