

The Gospel of John

Session 4 John 5:1—6:24

I. John 5:1-18

1. Jesus now travels to Jerusalem for the second time (cf. 2:13) in conjunction with a “feast of the Jews” (5:1). This phrase suggests some distance between Jesus and “the Jews” (cf. 2:13-22).
2. 5:2-3 provides information about the location of what is about to be narrated. This is the Pool of Bethesda, located to the north of the Temple and near the Antonia Fortress. While the pool was probably used by pilgrims for purification before entering the Temple precincts, it is also associated with healing. 5:4 (often placed in brackets or a footnote because of weak attestation) reports the belief that at certain points an angel would stir the water such that whoever stepped in the pool first would be healed.
3. The pool is a setting of misery with the blind, lame and paralyzed gathered around it and all hoping for healing. The fact that the man whom Jesus approaches has been an “invalid” for thirty-eight years suggests both misery and futility. Jesus’ extraordinary knowledge is on display in 5:6. Despite knowing the man’s condition, Jesus asks him if he wishes to be healed. This is because he does not wish to be known simply as wonder worker; the aim of this encounter is to bring this man to faith.
4. The man clearly does not know who Jesus is for he simply wants physical help in getting to the pool so as to be healed (5:7). His desire in getting help to get to the pool is met by a command from Jesus: “Get up, take up your bed and walk” (5:8). This command creates the condition for its being carried out. Note that the healing is only the beginning of the narrative and not the culmination. 5:9 indicates that conflict is ahead for the healing has taken place on the Sabbath.
5. In 5:10-13 “the Jews” appear to accuse the man of violating the Sabbath. Since he is carrying something, this constitutes work (5:10). The man refuses to take responsibility for violating the Sabbath since he was simply following the instruction of the man who healed him. It is made clear that he does not know who Jesus is (5:13).
6. In the next scene (5:14), Jesus finds the man in the Temple and immediately shifts the focus from the Sabbath to sin. In doing this, Jesus makes it clear that he is more than a healer or miracle worker. We have already been told that Jesus is the true Temple. For John, it is important to see that Jesus transcends the Sabbath.
7. In 5:16-18 makes it clear that “the Jews” began to persecute Jesus and were seeking to kill him for breaking the Sabbath and putting himself on a level with God. Jesus’ defense of his actions is grounded in the theology of creation. Because God is not inactive on the Sabbath (since if he were the universe would cease to exist), neither is Jesus inactive on the Sabbath. The actions of the Father and the actions of Jesus are inextricably connected. The Sabbath celebrated the sovereignty of God over creation

II. John 5:19-30

1. In this section the man whom Jesus has healed and “the Jews” fade from sight and Jesus speaks about his mission and relationship to the Father. The fact that Jesus works on the Sabbath becomes a way into speaking of his identity (signaled by 5:17).
2. In 5:19-20, Jesus defends his actions and counters the accusation that he is making himself into a rival god. While the Son and the Father are equal, the Son does not act as an independent agent. Because of

the love of Son for the Father, the action of the Son is perfectly coordinated with the Father. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he is doing.

3. To show that the Son is “Lord of the Sabbath,” Jesus makes it clear that he shares the sovereign authority of the Father which is the authority to give life. This was, of course, of the things that God did on the Sabbath. Likewise, the Son shares the Father’s authority to judge. In fact, the Father has given the authority to judge to the Son (5:21).
4. Because the Son shares completely in the Father’s authority, such that while they are distinct their authority is not, those who do not honor the Son do not honor the Father who sent him (5:23). This is the central fault of “the Jews”. While the Father and the Son are distinguishable, they are not separable.
5. In 5:24-25, the one who hears Jesus’ word and believes that he was sent by the Father has already passed from death to life. Eternal life is not simply a future reality. Jesus’ actions on the Sabbath are justified because he is the source of Life. In short, all the work that Israel understood God to do on the Sabbath is done by the Son.
6. In 5:26-27, we find Jesus’ central claim about himself, one which echoes 1:4. The Son has “life in himself” and so possesses the same nature as the Father. If reality is divided between the Creator and that which is created, the Son is with the Father on the same side of this division. The role of executing judgment, which is the task of bringing creation to its intended fulfillment, has been given to the Son. This means that the Son does something which the Old Testament teaches that only God can do.
7. 5:28-29 looks toward a future consummation (referred to by the word eschatology). If the Sabbath celebrates the sovereignty of God, then the future will reveal the sovereignty of the Son for his word will raise the dead and will usher the good into life and the evil into judgment. Note the point being made here: the word of the Son is sovereign in that it reaches beyond death.
8. 5:30 brings this section to a conclusion. What is Jesus’ response to the accusation made in 5:16-18? The Son only does what the Father does and does not have a will or purposes independent of the Father. This is not a sign of inferiority but an indication of the fundamental unity of the Son and the Father. Because of the love between Father and Son, neither seeks to be independent of the other.

III. John 5:31-47

1. This section continues Jesus’ address to “the Jews” (although they were last referred to in 5:19). If Jesus is on trial, then he needs witnesses. Who testifies on his behalf?
2. Jesus acknowledges that his own testimony about himself is insufficient. (In a Jewish trial, two witnesses were required to establish the truth.) Jesus says that there is “another” (5:32) who testifies on his behalf. This witness is John the Baptist whose witness is found in 3:22-36. Jesus makes it clear that he is not in need of John’s testimony, but that John was sent to bear witness to “the Jews” so that they might be saved (5:34). They were, however, unable to accept John’s testimony
3. But Jesus has a witness who is greater than John for he has been entrusted with a work from the Father (5:36). Jesus does this work to perfection and this testifies to who he is. What he does points to his identity as the one sent by the Father. Ultimately, it is the Father who bears witness to Jesus (5:37). Jesus levels a very serious charge against “the Jews” which is that they have never heard his voice or seen his form (or image). As becomes clear in 5:38, he is speaking of himself. Jesus is the voice and form of God and because “the Jews” have not believed in him, their claim to know God is shown to be false.
4. While Jesus has been put on trial, he now accuses his accusers. They misunderstand Scripture because it is a witness to the Son and “the Jews” are blind to its witness (5:39). While searching Scripture for eternal life, they are unable to see the Word of Life in their presence.
5. In 5:41-44 two opposed notions of glory (or esteem) are introduced. Jesus does not seek glory from human beings because he knows that he has come in the Father’s name (5:43). “The Jews” seek human

glory (praise and esteem from other people) but not the glory of God. Ironically, in rejected Jesus who is sent by the Father on the grounds that he is breaking the Sabbath, they reject the God of the Sabbath. It is important to note here that “the Jews” are not being criticized for being Jews but for failing to be Jews.

6. Jesus notes that in their trial their chief accuser is actually Moses (5:45). Here, Moses probably stands for the whole Law. Jesus presents Moses as one of his witnesses (5:46). A failure to truly believe Moses leads to a refusal to believe Jesus in that Moses points to Jesus and Jesus brings the Law to fulfillment (as in 1:17).

IV. John 6:1-4

1. This section introduces the miracle of the loaves and fishes in 6:5-15 and provides a context which suggest how it is to be read.
2. We are given three important details which will help us to read what follows. (1) A “large crowd” follows Jesus because of the signs that he is doing. We have learned that “sign faith” is radically incomplete. (2) Jesus ascends “the mountain” with his disciples and this should recall Moses’ ascent of Mt. Sinai. (3) Passover is at hand and this suggests something important about the miracle which follows.

V. John 6:5-15

1. Jesus sees a “large crowd” coming to him and poses a question to test the disciples (6:6). From where can enough bread be bought to feed such a crowd? The motif of bread/food has already been introduced in 4:31-34. Phillip offers his opinion that a substantial amount of money would not buy enough food to feed such a crowd (6:7). Andrew sounds a similar note by pointing out that what little food is on hand is totally inadequate. Like Nicodemus, the disciples are limited by their presuppositions and are unable to see past them.
2. Ignoring the views of the disciples, Jesus has the crowd sit down in preparation for a meal (which were eaten in a reclining position). The detail about there being “much grass” seems to recall Psalm 23:2 where the Lord allows his people to recline in “green pastures”. There are five thousand men present (6:10).
3. Jesus next performs three actions which are associated with the Eucharist. He takes the bread, gives thanks, and distributes the bread (note Luke 22:14-23). Not only are all fed, all are satisfied (6:11). And not only are all satisfied, twelve baskets of leftovers are gathered up. As with the miracle at Cana (2:1-11), the emphasis is on superabundance. Not only have Jesus’ actions suggested the Eucharist, this feeding takes place at Passover and so recalls the manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16). While only enough manna was given for each day, at this feeding there is abundant food even after everyone has eaten. The disciples will be stewards of this miraculous food and this may be a sign of their future role in the Church. Here, the Eucharist appears as the fulfillment of the Passover.
4. The aftermath is reported in 6:14-15. It is clear that the crowd has not been led to genuine faith by the miraculous feeding. They think that Jesus is “the Prophet” anticipated by Deuteronomy 18:15-18, a prophet “like Moses”. The crowd, like Nicodemus, cannot imagine anyone greater than Moses. Because the messiah was expected to bring manna with him, the crowd also sees Jesus through its own messianic expectations. Jesus refuses to allow this to happen and withdraws (6:15).

VI. John 6:16-24

1. This is the aftermath of the events just described. Jesus has withdrawn from the scene and the disciples now get into a boat to return to Capernaum. As they set out, it is dark. Adding further to the frightening nature of this journey, a strong wind begins to blow (6:18). Then Jesus approaches them walking on the Sea of Galilee. All of this is enough to produce fear. It is important to note the association which Jews made between the sea and chaos (note Genesis 1:1-2). This is the key to meaning of this narrative.
2. 6:20 lets us see that this is a theophany, a self-manifestation of God. Like the God of Israel (Psalm 93:4-3), Jesus has authority over the sea and the elements.
3. While the crowd has sought to make Jesus king because it thinks he meets its messianic expectations, Jesus comes to the disciples as I AM, as the Lord.
4. In 6:22-24 we leave the disciples and return to the crowd. It has noticed that the miracle-working provider of messianic manna has vanished along with his disciples and so decides to follow. 6:23 emphasizes the eucharistic nature of the miracle. While the crowd is simply interested in miraculous bread, John emphasizes that the importance of this bread is that Jesus gave thanks (eucharist) over it. We are reminded that that in its "following" of Jesus the crowd is not enacting genuine discipleship. When 6:24 reports that the crowd was "seeking Jesus" this is said ironically. It is not really seeking him at all.