

The Gospel of John

Session 6

John 7:53-10:21

I. John 7:53-8:11

1. Our earliest manuscripts of John do not contain 7:53-8:11 and some translations place this section in brackets to indicate this fact. In its current location, it seems to be an interruption in the narrative. It seems to have been simply inserted at this point.
2. 7:53-8:2 sets the stage for the action. Jesus comes to the Temple “early in the morning” (8:2) and “all the people” come to him. Jesus is in the Temple teaching a large gathering when the scribes and Pharisees enter the scene.
3. The scribes and Pharisees are intent on a public confrontation with Jesus. They wish to test him and to show that he is in conflict with the Law (8:6). They bring with them a woman who has been caught in the act of committing adultery (8:3-4) and demand to know what Jesus would do about this. It is clear that they are unconcerned about what might happen to this woman and equally unconcerned about her husband. They have a point to make and both she and he are only important insofar as they can be used in this way.
4. It is certainly significant that the man with whom she committed adultery is not brought with her for it is impossible to commit adultery without a partner. Where is he? When challenged to make a judgment, Jesus begins to write in the dust on the ground, a gesture which should probably be taken as a sign of indifference. When pressed for an answer, Jesus responds with a challenge: “I think that everyone who is without sexual sin should execute the penalty prescribed by the Law” (Deuteronomy 17:1). He then resumes writing.
5. The gathering of scribes and Pharisees disperses beginning with the oldest members. What are we to conclude from this? For the first time, Jesus addresses the woman and treats her as a person, not as a pawn in a game of chess. Where are her accusers? Jesus allows her to go with the admonition to sin no more.
6. The point of this narrative is not that Jesus thinks adultery to be a minor issue. Nor is it that while the scribes and Pharisees are strict rule keepers, Jesus is not. Instead, this narrative shows that it is possible to keep the law without thereby intending any real obedience to God. It is also possible to advocate for strict enforcement of the Law while being blind to one’s own sin. Here, the Word of Life simultaneously acknowledges the woman’s sin and opens the way to new life for her.

II. John 8:12-20

1. 8:12 would make sense if it were immediately preceded by 7:52. We need to remember that what Jesus says here is being said in the context of the Feast of Booths (7:2). This feast involved the lighting of torches in the Temple at night. It is within this context that Jesus says, “I am the light of the world” (8:12). We also want to remember that Torah or the Law was considered the light of the world (Psalm 119:105). Here, Jesus claims to both personify and go beyond both Temple and Torah.
2. The Pharisees immediately assail Jesus. They say that what he says is invalid as testimony for instead of producing at least two witnesses (Deuteronomy 17:6) he simply bears testimony about himself. As we have seen the validity of Jesus’ self-testimony is dependent upon his identity as the one sent from God,

the Word. As such, he transcends the Law. Jesus' self-testimony is true because of his origin and destiny (8:14). For John, the all-important truth about Jesus the Word is that what he says is self-authenticating.

3. The Pharisees know nothing of Jesus' origin and destiny and, therefore, cannot judge what he says. The key issue here is judgment and the basis upon which judgment is made. Unable to go beyond external appearances, the Pharisees are unable to make a true judgment about Jesus.
4. While the Pharisees judge falsely, Jesus does not judge for all that he does is not simply his own action but a joint action of the Father and the Son. As the light of the world, he is the precondition for right judgments to be made. For both of these reasons, Jesus' judgment has no trace of falsity.
5. In 8:17 Jesus refers to Numbers 35:30 and notes that the requirement of two witnesses and also notes that it does not and cannot apply to him. Since all that he does is done conjointly with the Father, he and the Father are their own witnesses (8:17).
6. The question posed by the Pharisees in 8:19 reflects their failure of understanding. They think that Jesus is speaking of his biological father and this only shows that they do not know his Father. This is because, one knows the Father through the Son; the failure to know the Son is also the failure to know the Father. Of course, Jesus is telling the Pharisees that do not truly know God.

III. John 8:21-30

1. The conversation begun in 8:12 continues. The conversation partners continue to be "the Jews" (identified as the Pharisees in 8: 13). Jesus is speaking of his mission: he has come from the Father and will return to him. "The Jews" will seek him but where he is going, they are not able to God (because they do not know God (8:19). The emphasis here is on the fact that although "the Jews" plan to kill Jesus, they exercise not control over him at all. His death will actually effect his return to the Father.
2. Their incomprehension becomes clear in 8:22 as they understand Jesus to mean that he will commit suicide. Not knowing of his origin and his return to the Father, they can only understand what he has said in this way. Jesus makes clear the fundamental difference between they and he: "You are from below; I am from above" (8:23). They are of "this world" (as corrupted by sin) while Jesus is "not of this world" (8:23). Despite the fact that they claim to believe in God, their orientation is completely conformed to the world and, thus, they are blinded to God's revelation. Note that it is possible for "religious" people to be "of this world".
3. Jesus issues a warning: "unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins" (8:24). This is not a fate since belief in Jesus could change this outcome (note 3:16-21). The division between "above" and "below" is only made final by unbelief. Here we see another huge claim: spiritual death can only be avoided by faith in Jesus as the life-giving Word of God.
4. In 8:25 "the Jews" ask what appears to be a genuine question: Who are you? This question can only be answered in relation to the Father and this is the obstacle which stands in the way their progress (8:19). Jesus makes it clear that from the beginning of his ministry he has sought to reveal the Father and to answer this question. Jesus could list their faults and offer a critique of them, but his mission is to declare to the world what he has heard from the Father (8:26).
5. It is important to note that Jesus wants to communicate with "the Jews"; their hatred of him is not met with hatred in return. When Jesus is "lifted up" (crucified) by "the Jews" this will result in the revelation that he is the One sent by the Father. The "hour" of Jesus' death and glorification will be simultaneous. Jesus offers an answer to the question posed in 8:25: "I do nothing on my own authority but speak as the Father has taught me" (8:28). Jesus can only be understood when one recognizes the fact that he and the Father are always with one another. Even when he is "lifted up" and is seemingly abandoned, Jesus will not be alone (8:29).
6. 8:30 makes it clear that "the Jews" are not simply lost in darkness since some of them believe in him.

IV. John 8:31-38

1. 8:31 requires careful interpretation. It seems that “the Jews” identified here are different from those in 8:30. The group in 8:31 seems to be those who have the beginnings of faith but who still have some way to go. They have a partial faith in Jesus. Jesus now attempts to draw them into genuine faith.
2. The way to genuine faith is through abiding in the word of Jesus. Here, faith is presented as a pilgrimage which takes place by a continuing commitment to and trust in Jesus. To abide in Jesus (8:31) is to be united to him despite that fact that one does not yet possess a complete understanding. The fruit of discipleship is knowledge of the Truth and it is this Truth which liberates one (from sin).
3. “The Jews” are convinced that the Law brings freedom and so respond that that they have no need of the freedom Jesus is speaking about. As the “offspring” of Abraham, they have never been enslaved and so, they maintain, Jesus cannot supply them with freedom. How can Jesus accomplish what the Law has done?
4. Jesus responds to this that simple descent from Abraham is not sufficient to make one free. If one sins, then one is enslaved to sin (8:34). Descent from Abraham cannot prevent one from sinning. “The Jews” think of themselves as children of God but are they really? Jesus claims that only the Son can make one a child of God (1:12). Their claim to be Abraham’s children is falsified by the fact that the word of Jesus finds no place in them; they refuse to allow space for Jesus’ word. “The Jews” are self-deceived and the reason for this is that their “father” is not the Father of Jesus.

V. John 8:39-47

1. In 8:39 “the Jews” repeat their claim to be children of Abraham. Jesus notes that Abraham was supremely a man open to the word of God (as in Genesis 12:1-9) and a man of faith. If they were truly children of Abraham, they would be open to his word rather than attempting to kill him (8:39-40).
2. In refusing to hear the word that comes from the Father, they show that they are not children of Abraham. “The Jews” respond to this by accusing Jesus of being conceived in an act of adultery. (In other words, he is the one with the questionable paternity.) This accusation could refer to both Jesus’ physical descent and to faithfulness to God as “adultery” can refer to unfaithfulness to the covenant (note Hosea 1:2).
3. They move from their claim of descent from Abraham to a claim to be God’s legitimate children (8:41). Jesus responds to this by saying that if they were true children of God, they would love him because he has come from God and has been sent by God. In 8:43 Jesus states the key issue: they cannot hear what he says. Instead of having God as their father, they clearly have the devil as their father because they reflect his fundamental disposition as one opposed to the truth (8:44). Jesus is probably thinking of Genesis 3:1-24 and the serpent’s act of deception: “When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (8:44).
4. It is to be expected that the children of the devil cannot hear the truth for their aim is to suppress it. “The Jews” have made a decision to reject the Truth and this explains their opposition to Jesus and their refusal to hear his words: “The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God” (8:47).

VI. John 8:48-59

1. With this section, the conversation with “the Jews” concludes and their hostility and intransigence is on full display.
2. In response to Jesus saying that they are children of the devil, “the Jews” accuse Jesus of being insane and being a Samaritan (8:48). Jesus is attempting to make a theological point while they respond with personal insult. Jesus makes it clear that what he has said about himself is not self-promotion. He does not seek his own glory. This is the role of the Father who seeks to glorify the Son. Those who receive the Father’s Word from the Son will be delivered from death into Life (8:51).
3. “The Jews” remain within what they know. Just as the Samaritan woman found it difficult to believe that Jesus was greater than Jacob (4:12), “the Jews” find it impossible to believe that Jesus is greater than Abraham. Abraham and the prophets died, so how can Jesus possibly offer eternal life (8:52-53)? For “the Jews,” whatever Jesus says about himself must be self-promotion.
4. Just as the Son bears witness to the Father, the Father glorifies the Son. While “the Jews” claim to worship God, they do not know him while Jesus knows him perfectly. Jesus says that Abraham looked forward to his coming. This is probably based on a Jewish tradition that the secrets of the messianic age were disclosed to him (8:56). “The Jews” misinterpret this to mean that Jesus is claiming to have known Abraham, and this only increases their sense that what he is saying is simply absurd.
5. The culmination of this conversation comes in 8:58: Jesus is not claiming to be a contemporary of Abraham for this would be to claim too little. Jesus preceded Abraham: “before Abraham was, I am” (8:58). Jesus identifies himself in the same way that God identifies himself in Exodus 3:14.

VII. John 9:1-41

1. The whole of chapter 9 involves another encounter with “the Jews” (9:18). Upon seeing a man blind from birth, the disciples ask who is responsible for his blindness, his parents or the man himself (while in the womb). Jesus replies that neither is responsible; he was born this way so that the power of God might be displayed in him. Note that in 9:4 Jesus includes the disciples in his work. Jesus is the light of the world but there is the coming “night” which will result from Jesus’ absence. Because Jesus has included the disciples in his work, the work of revealing God will continue. Remember that in 1:4 Light and Life are closely associated. Of course, light was one of the themes of the Feast of Tabernacles (7:2).
2. Without consulting the blind man, Jesus applies a mixture of dirt and saliva to his eyes and instructs him to wash in the pool of Siloam. The man does so and returns with the ability to see. It is clear that the water from the pool has not brought this about. Note that the blind man instantly follows Jesus’ instruction (9:7).
3. There is now a dispute about this man among his neighbors, with some saying that the man with sight is the formerly blind beggar and others insisting that the man with sight only looks like the blind beggar. Jesus has once again brought about division. When asked, the man is able to say how his sight was restored and he is able to name the one who restored his sight as Jesus. Beyond this, he knows nothing (9:11).
4. The neighbors bring the man to the Pharisees and now “the Jews” enter into the picture (9:18). What most interests the Pharisees is not that the man’s sight has been restored but that Jesus has “violated” the Sabbath by making clay (9:14). There is a division regarding Jesus’ origin, with some saying that someone who breaks the Sabbath could not be from God and others insisting that a sinner could not do such a sign. When they ask the man’s opinion, he offers that Jesus is a “prophet” (9:17; cf. 4:19).
5. “The Jews” call the man’s parents in an effort to prove that he was not born blind. They are willing to testify that he was born blind but will not comment on how his sight was restored or on who restored it.

9:22 notes that what they say and do not say is highly influenced the fear of being “put out” of the synagogue.

6. The Pharisees now call the man a second time (9:24) and demand that he “give glory to God” (a phrase used before giving testimony). At this point, they are not really interested in testimony though. Their opinion should be the man’s opinion as well: Jesus is a sinner (9:24). “The Jews” continually focus on the “how” of the restoration of sight (9:26) and ignore the “who” involved. The man finds this obsession with “how” puzzling and he can only conclude that they want to become Jesus disciples (9:27).
7. In 9:31 the man puts things in a clear way: Jesus cannot be a sinner because if he were God would not listen to him and he would not be able to do what he has done. On the other hand, “if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him” (9:31). Compare this with 4:34. He notes, correctly, that no Old Testament figure is reported to have restored sight to someone born blind. What Jesus has done is without precedent and so the judgment that he is a sinner must be false.
8. “The Jews” have no counter argument and so they insult him and eject him from among them. Note that they accept that he was born blind and that this is in indication of that he was born in “utter sin” (9:34). Both Jesus and this man are sinners and, thus, in no position to teach them. Ironically, Jesus is the Word of the Father and the man has spoken the truth in 9:31-32. “The Jews” will not hear the truth (note 8:42).
9. This narrative concludes with Jesus coming to the man. As “the Jews” have been moving further away from Jesus, the man has been moving toward him. Jesus poses a question: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (9:35). “Son of Man” is a title Jesus uses to designate himself (note 3:13-14). The crucial moment comes in 9:36. The man does not know enough to answer this question, so he asks Jesus to supply the answer: he is willing to hear the word of Jesus. When Jesus identifies himself as the Son of Man, the man believes him and then worships (9:38). The twofold nature of Jesus’ ministry is expressed in 9:39. He has come as the light of the world (8:12) to lead the blind to sight and to reveal the blindness of those who refuse to have faith in him. The choice is between light and darkness.

VIII. John 10:1-21

1. 10:1-21 is a discourse with the “good shepherd” at its center. This discourse is directed against “the Jews” and what they have said in 9:40. The Old Testament is essential background for understanding what is being said. Israel’s leaders can be spoken of as “shepherds” and, ultimately, God is the Shepherd of Israel. Furthermore, the messiah can be thought of as a shepherd as well. All of these themes can be found in Ezekiel 34.
2. 10:1-6 a parable, contrasting two different kinds of leaders. On one hand, there is the “thief” who enters the sheepfold surreptitiously for the purpose of promoting his own interests. On the other hand, there is the shepherd who is known to the sheep as their protector and provider. Just as sheep respond when their shepherd calls their name, because they know him as their shepherd, they will not follow the voice of a stranger. Clearly, Jesus thinks of the “the Jews” as thieves and not as genuine shepherds. The true Israel will not listen to them.
3. Since “the Jews” did not understand this parable (10:6), Jesus now explains it. He is the “door” to the sheepfold (10:9) in that all legitimate access to the sheep is through him and in that the true well-being of the sheep is gained through him. The “shepherds” which have come before Jesus (“the Jews”) are not shepherds at all but “thieves” (10:8). Thieves can harm the sheep in many ways, but the greatest harm comes from teaching falsehood. To do this is to “kill and destroy” (10:10). By contrast, Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the True Shepherd. In Ezekiel 34 the Good Shepherd is God. The difference between the thieves (“the Jews”) and the Good Shepherd (Jesus/The Father) is that the latter is willing to sacrifice his own life for the sake of the sheep (10:11). This is a clear reference to the crucifixion which reveals

Jesus' complete dedication to his mission from the Father. The contrast between the thieves and the Good Shepherd is stark. The former only "destroy" while the latter comes to give life "abundantly" (10:10).

4. In 10:16-18 two important themes emerge. First, Jesus the Good Shepherd will create the New Israel (10:16) which will be "one flock" (consisting of Jewish and Gentile Christians). The Good Shepherd brings Israel to her fulfillment (something already hinted at in 4:1-42). Second, the Good Shepherd will not only give his life for the New Israel, he will also claim it back (10:17-18). Jesus' death and resurrection are only properly understood when one grasps the fact that he has the "authority" both to give his life and to "take it up again" (10:18).
5. Jesus' words produce another division among "the Jews" (see 9:16 and 7:12-13). Some conclude that Jesus is simply insane (note 8:48) while others conclude that this could not be the case since Jesus has restored the sight of a blind man (10:21). The view of the latter is similar to the man who received his sight from Jesus (9:31-32). The response of "the Jews" to Jesus is certainly not uniform.