

The Claims of Christ

A Sermon on John 5:16-29

by John M. Frame

This is a passage I have wanted to preach on for a long time. During my college years this passage did more than any other to firm up my understanding, first of who Jesus is, and second of what the gospel is — the good news Jesus brings. There are, perhaps, other passages that are equally clear in setting forth the person and message of Jesus, but none, I think, that are any more clear. When you look at these words carefully, they say some astonishing things.

It begins with Jesus' healing of a lame man at the pool of Bethesda. It just happened that he did this on the Sabbath day. (I don't really think it "just happened"; I think he chose intentionally to do it on that particular day.) The Jews were upset, first because Jesus told the lame man to carry his mat on the Sabbath — they considered that work, and one shouldn't work on the Sabbath day. Second, they were upset that Jesus himself worked on the Sabbath — he had healed somebody, and healing is also work.

Now Jesus had various answers to this kind of complaint. Elsewhere in Scripture, Jesus appealed to the principles of necessity and mercy. In Matthew 12 and Mark 2, Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. God did not give us the Sabbath as a burden, but as a blessing. It is lawful to do what is necessary and to show mercy. Of course you can eat grain on the Sabbath. Of course you can rescue an animal who has fallen into a pit. And of course Jesus can heal the sick, the injured, the disabled. The very nature of the Sabbath is to display God's grace and mercy.

But that's not Jesus' argument in John 5. There, he says something very remarkable. There is something like it in Mark 2:28 where Jesus says, "The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." The Sabbath in the Old Testament was *God's* day, the day of Jehovah the Lord. It was his day not ours, a day for doing his work, not ours. Amazingly in Mark 2:28, Jesus takes over the Sabbath! The Old Testament called it the Sabbath of the Lord your God; Jesus says that *he* is Lord of the Sabbath, that the Sabbath is *his* day. That is a claim to deity if I have ever seen one.

But what Jesus says in John 5:17 is perhaps even more remarkable. He says, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working."

Notice here first that Jesus refers to “my Father.” Two thousand years ago that was not a common Jewish way of speaking about God. In fact, verse 18 says that the Jews were outraged by it. The phrase suggests a special relationship between Jesus and God, an exclusive relationship, a relationship not shared by others. The Jews understood it this way (verse 18): Jesus “was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.” “My Father” means that Jesus was *the* Son of God. The son of a lion is a lion; the son of a man is a man; the son of God is God.

But beyond that, look at how Jesus answers the Jews. He says, in effect, “God works on the Sabbath, so I can too.” Now Genesis tells us that God rested after he created the heavens and the earth. The Jews recognized that, but they sometimes pointed out that God’s rest was not inactivity. God rested from the work of creation, but he continued his work of providence, the work of governing and maintaining the universe. So Jesus and the Jews agreed that God works on his Sabbath. But the Jews would have gone on to make the obvious point: God works on the Sabbath, but that doesn’t mean we can. After all, God has many rights we don’t have. God has the right to give or take human life as he wills; we don’t have that right. God may take away a man’s wealth, for no reason except that he wants to use it for his purpose. We can’t do that. We must worship someone higher than ourselves; God doesn’t have to. So it certainly makes sense to say, “God works on the Sabbath, but we may not.” But Jesus says, “God works on the Sabbath, so I can too.” It’s a bad argument! It’s bad, unless Jesus himself is God, unless Jesus has the privileges and rights of deity, unless Jesus has such a special relationship to “his Father” that the usual rules don’t apply to him.

By the way, Jesus is not abrogating the Sabbath law here. He is not saying that because God works on the Sabbath, *anybody* can work on the Sabbath. I believe myself that the Sabbath law is still in effect and that Sunday is the Christian Sabbath. But that makes the point even stronger. He’s not saying *anybody* can work on the Sabbath, he’s saying, “I can.” He’s saying, “I can do what God does. I have the rights over the Sabbath that God has. I am Lord of the Sabbath.”

Well, as I mentioned, the Jews were outraged by this. They tried to kill him for making himself God. But they hadn’t heard anything yet. Let’s look at Jesus’ reply.

What does he say? Does he pull back from his earlier statement? (“Wait a minute, my friends, I didn’t really mean to suggest that I was equal to God, I merely said that I was an obedient servant of God.”) No, that’s not what he says.

He does begin with a genuinely humble observation in verse 19: “The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing.” That may have disarmed his critics for a moment, and of course it is an important statement. As a man, Jesus was a humble person. He was an obedient servant of God. He came into the world to do the will of another, his Father. He didn’t seek his own comfort or wealth or earthly rule; he sought only to do the will of his Father. But there’s more in this verse, a real kicker. “The Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees the Father doing, *because whatever the Father does the Son also does.*” Imagine that! “Everything God does, I do! God works on the Sabbath, so I can too. Whatever God does, I do.”

Let’s list some of the things that God does, and that *only* God does:

ACT	God	Christ
Eternal plan for the world	Eph. 1:11	Eph. 1:4
Creation	Gen. 1:1	John 1:3
Providence	Rom. 11:36	Heb. 1:3
Miracle	Ps. 72:18	John 2:23; 20:30ff.
Judgment	Gen. 18:25	John 5:22,25-30
Salvation	John 5:21	John 5:21,25ff.
Raising the dead	Deut. 32:39 1 Sam. 2:6 2 Kings 5:7 Ezek. 37:13 John 5:21	John 5:21,24-26,28ff.

Only God has an eternal plan for human history; but that plan has Christ at its center. Before any of us were born, before the universe was even created, God’s people were chosen in Christ. Only God is the creator of heaven and earth. but Christ is also the creator of all things: “Without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3). Only God is in absolute control of human history, governing and maintaining the creation: “for of him, and through him, and unto him, are all things” (Rom. 11:36). But Jesus, too, is the Lord of providence, “upholding all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3). Only God can do wondrous works, according to Psalm 72:18. But the Gospel of John itself is about

the miraculous signs of Jesus. John sets forth these signs so that his readers might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:30-31). And as we've seen from today's passage, Jesus has just finished healing a lame man. So he says in verse 20, "For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does." Jesus can do anything God does!

But more: "Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these." What could be greater?

Verse 21: "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it." In the Old Testament, raising the dead was the work of God. In 2 Kings 5, Naaman the Syrian general went to the king of Israel to be healed of his leprosy. The king was not in the healing business. He replied, "Am I God?? Can I kill and bring back to life?" But unlike that king, Jesus says, "I am God; I can kill and bring back to life." When Jesus said he would show us greater things than his miracles, this is surely one of them. Raising the dead. He raised his friend Lazarus from the grave, who had been buried four days.

Verse 22: "Moreover." What could be "moreover" than raising the dead? "Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son." Jesus is the judge of all the earth! Imagine! Little baby Jesus in the manger, the judge of all the earth. Little boy Jesus in the carpenter shop, the judge of all the earth. Jesus the poor servant of God who had no place to lay his head, the judge of all the earth. Jesus dying on the awful cross, the judge of all the earth. On the last day, we all will stand before Jesus, before the one who is despised and rejected of men, the judge of all the earth.

But when you think about it, verse 23 is even more amazing, as it infers a conclusion from these great facts. Get the pattern here: Jesus does everything God does, creation, providence, miracle, judgment, salvation, "so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him." Here Jesus says that he doesn't just do the works of God; he also deserves the *worship* of God, the honor that belongs to God alone. Think again of the Old Testament, of how God jealously guarded the worship of Israel. He forbade them to worship any other gods, any angels, any idols or images, any human beings, anything other than himself, the one and only true God. Now here comes Jesus, and he says, "Worship me. As you honor God, honor me."

A friend of mine has preached sermons entitled "Why I Am not a Jehovah's Witness," one from John 1 and one from Hebrews 1, I seem to recall. These were

memorable sermons from memorable texts, emphasizing that, contrary to the beliefs of the Jehovah's Witnesses cult, Jesus Christ is truly and fully God. But I think we can also take the Jehovah's Witnesses to John 5. Jesus is the man who says, "Worship me." If he is not God, then the Jews were right: he was a terrible blasphemer, and he deserved to die. But if he was right to say, "Worship me," then he was God — not "a" god, not a high angel, not a semi-divine being, but God.

And we need to present this message to our liberal religious friends, those who say that Jesus was a great human teacher, but not God. Jesus said, "Worship me." If he is not God, then he is not a great human teacher. If he is not God, he is foolish, deluded, maybe crazy, or maybe some kind of egomaniac. But if he is a great teacher, if we can trust his words, then he is God. He does everything God does, he deserves the worship of God because he is God.

Now what does this mean for us? It means that our relationship with Jesus, as our relationship with God, is the most important relationship in our lives. It is a matter of life and death. Our eternal life depends on Jesus.

Verse 24 tells us how Jesus gives us eternal life. It's a good verse to memorize. I think it sums up the basic gospel in a wonderfully concise way, like John 3:16, and it gives us some important facts that you won't find in John 3:16. It's a good evangelistic verse, a good one to show to inquirers. We know it's an especially important verse because Jesus begins, "Truly, truly I say to you," or "I tell you the truth." Then he continues, "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."

First, we learn that we find out about salvation from *listening* to Jesus' word. Forget the idea that you can figure out for yourself how to find fellowship with God. Forget the idea that you have the truth down inside you, or that you can find it in nature or in some human religion or philosophy. God reveals himself everywhere, but if you want to know how to get eternal life, there is only one thing to do, and that is to listen to the word of Jesus. Jesus is God; when Jesus speaks, God speaks.

Second, we learn that eternal life comes from *believing* the Father, believing the One who speaks in Jesus. The Father's word says that apart from Christ we are lost, guilty, hopeless sinners: "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23); and "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). God says that Christ came to die the death we deserved, "to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). God says that Jesus was raised from the dead, by the glory of his

Father. If we *believe* him, we have eternal life. It's so simple. "God, I believe that what you say is true. What you say about Jesus, what you say about me."

Notice that the one who believes *has* eternal life. It doesn't say that he *will* have eternal life, though that would be true and important. But it says we have it *now*. What a wonderful thing to know! We don't need to be on edge, wondering whether we'll be saved on the last day. Nor is it the frustrating idea that we'll be saved later, but now we're lost. No. If you believe God, if you trust him, if Jesus is your Lord and savior, you are saved already, now. You can be sure of that, because God says so.

Salvation is in the past tense. Notice how the verse goes on to emphasize that: he "will not be condemned; he *has crossed over* from death to life." We know that we are secure for the future and for all eternity because of what has already happened; the decisive moment has already taken place. *We have crossed over*. And we can never go back; for once we've crossed over, we *know* that at no time in the future will we ever come into condemnation. Once we believe God, we are saved for ever; the matter is settled for time and all eternity. Isn't that wonderful to know?

In the next verses, Jesus elaborates: "I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live" (5:25). Who are the "dead" here? I don't believe he's talking about the second coming here, because he says the time has already come. Evidently, then, "dead" (here, as elsewhere in Scripture) is a description of you and me, apart from Christ. Back in Ezekiel 37, God spoke of Israel as dead men's dry bones. But God raised up those bones by speaking his powerful, life-giving word. That is what he still does. Jesus speaks his word, and people dead in their sins get up and walk around. They believe God and receive eternal life. Jesus' word is a wonderful, life-giving word, because like the Father he has "life in himself" (5:26). The only eternal life available to us is in Jesus.

So when we hear and believe Jesus' word, we rise from the dead. With him, we rise to newness of life.

If you don't rise from the dead now, you will certainly do it later, but in a very different way. Look at verses 28 and 29: "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned." Jesus isn't just repeating himself. This is a different event. Verse 25 talks about people today, dead in sin, rising to life at the word of Jesus. Verse 28 speaks about a future time. The pattern is similar: again there is the voice

of Jesus; again there is a resurrection. But it is a different resurrection. (These are the “first” and “second” resurrections of the Book of Revelation.) In the first resurrection, believers rise to new life in Christ. In the second resurrection, everyone rises to judgment.

The judgment is by works. Those who have done good will live, those who have done evil will be condemned. But those who have been through the first resurrection, Jesus’ people, will not be condemned, for they have already passed from death to life. If you believe in Jesus, you have nothing to fear on the last day. So for us, the judgment is not by works. Eternal life is a gift of God.

Let us look back on where we’ve been. Jesus does everything that God does — stand in awe of that. Jesus demands the very worship of God himself — let us praise him. Jesus is the only way of salvation — let us hear him and believe him. Jesus is the judge of all the earth — let us rejoice that in him we have passed from death to life, that we know we are saved.

If you do not trust and believe this wonderful savior, God in the flesh, be warned that he will judge you by your works. And your works will never be good enough to meet his high standards. Turn to him, trust in him, and you can be sure of eternal life, sure because you already have it, and it can’t be taken away.