

The Fourfold Witness

John 5:31-47

I once witnessed an automobile accident and was called upon to give eye-witness testimony. It was done informally, over the phone, and that information wasn't requested by the authorities until a couple months after the accident. By then my memory was very unclear even as to when it had occurred. I do remember that an automobile had hit a man riding a bicycle. But I'm afraid most of my testimony wasn't very helpful.

I hope there were other witnesses more helpful than me. Actually, Sharon and I saw the accident together, and had she answered the phone, they probably would have gotten much more specific information since her mind grasps and remembers details much better than mine. The failings of my memory in that case show just how very useful it is to have several witnesses in the effort to demonstrate and prove what is true.

In our text this morning, we have a list of four witnesses. And that's my outline this morning. These all are witnesses of Jesus Christ. Four separate and independent testimonies as to the true nature of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The first is his own self-testimony. It is,

I. THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS' OWN WORKS.

And yet we read that that testimony is inadequate.
v.31

Now, those are strange words, aren't they. Strange words for us who believe that everything about Jesus is true. And if you aren't careful, you might think that the Bible contradicts itself, because of what Jesus says in,

John 8:14 "Jesus answered and said to them, 'Even if I bear

witness of Myself, My witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going.'"

So what does Jesus mean in John 5 when he says, "If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true."?

Let me answer quickly and faithfully, that those words do not mean that anything Jesus SAID or taught was untrue. This whole text, all the verses we're studying this morning, teach just the opposite. The whole point of this text is to prove and demonstrate the truthfulness of everything that Jesus said. So what does verse 31 mean?

Simply that,

A. Jesus' own self-witness is not legally valid in itself.

The word for true also means genuine, or valid. And Jesus is making a very important legal point, demonstrating just how fully he submitted himself to the law of God. It's not just a good and wise thing to have more than one witness to testify in a court, it was required by the law. God's law required two witnesses to establish the truth of a matter. Not a single witness, but two, corroborating witnesses.

Deut. 19:15 "One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established."

Similarly,

Deut. 17:6 "Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness."

There are obvious protections given to the accused in that requirement, protections against a malicious or lying witness.

There must be two witnesses. So said the law. And the general equity of that law, or the principle of justice upon which it is based, should be applied in our own day as well.

Jesus reinforces that principle of justice and applies it to cases of church discipline, by quoting Deut. 19 in,

Mat.18:15 “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’”

Jesus himself submits to that law, and is willing to say that his own witness, in itself, is not valid. And so we have three other witnesses this morning. And knowing that there are those three other witnesses, Jesus’ own witness does become important. And his greatest witness to which he refers here, is his works. His supernatural works. His miracles. We see that,

B. Jesus’ works prove his divine origin and supernatural power.

v.36

It is the miracles that testify to the fact that Jesus was sent by God the Father. It is the miracles that testify to the fact that Jesus possessed, in himself, the supernatural power of God.

It is worth noting that in Jesus’ own time, no one could deny that the miracles were actually performed. The evidence was too overwhelming. So his enemies simply attributed them to the work of the Devil, since they couldn’t be denied.

John 11:47 Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, “What shall we do? For this Man works many

signs.”

And so we read what was preached about Jesus on the day of Pentecost,

Acts 2:22 “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know.”

In our day, however, the miracles face great opposition. To use labels quite broadly and generally, the teaching of the liberal church typically denies the historical reality of the miracles. Things like the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The virgin birth of Jesus Christ. The feeding of the five thousand. And on and on down the list. They are denied. Or declared to be unessential, unimportant as items of faith.

That was one of the issues that brought about the beginning of the OPC in 1936. A few years earlier, a document called the Auburn Affirmation was signed by a large number of ministers in the old mainline church, declaring among other things that a belief those miracles was not essential, that men could be ordained as ministers in the church without believing in them.

And I wonder how many ministers in mainline denominations today would believe in the truthfulness and historicity of those miracles. But those who saw the miracles never disputed them. They couldn’t, for the miracles were so numerous, so great, so public, so compassionate and beneficial to people, and so visible and easy to examine.

They proved that Jesus came from God and that he was indued with all the supernatural power of God.

That's the first witness. The second is,

II. THE WITNESS OF JOHN.

v.33

We've seen this before, and I'll just touch on it this morning.

A. John testifies to the truth of Jesus' deity.

The Jews had gone to John, as we studied in,
John 1:18-24

And John testified clearly about Jesus. And his testimony was true!

John 1:25-28

Indeed,

B. John's testimony was a shining lamp which identified Jesus.

v.34-35

Jesus is, of course, pointing out their ingratitude, by declaring how clearly and plainly John testified of him. He was a lamp, a burning lamp, a shining light. And for awhile, they even rejoiced in that light! John was initially received very well. We read in Matthew 3 that, "Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him."

But they would ultimately reject that light. And so there was a far greater testimony. A far greater testimony than the testimony of a man, even as great a man as John the Baptist. It was the testimony of God himself. The third witness.

III. THE WITNESS OF GOD THE FATHER.

v.32

Though there is some disagreement whether that verse refers

to John or to God the father, I believe it is to God the father. There is another who bears witness of me. Another true witness.

v.37a

The Father testifies of Jesus. The Father identifies Jesus. Specifically,

A. The father identifies Jesus as his beloved son.

Remember the testimony of God the father when Jesus submitted himself to baptism. We read,

Mark 1:11 Then a voice came from heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

That testimony came from the second Psalm, where we have this testimony in Jesus' own words,

Ps. 2:7 "I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. 8 Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel.'"

Remember, that's in the OT! And it is easy to see that the Father testified of Jesus throughout the Old Testament, throughout the law and the prophets. And so, as we read in our Confession of Faith, the covenant of grace during the days of the Old Covenant was "administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come!"

The father identified Jesus at so many places in the OT, from the promise of the victory of the seed of the woman over the seed of the serpent in Genesis 3, to the promise to Abraham to provide the sacrifice when he was about to put Isaac to death, to the

promise of a prophet like unto Moses, to the promise of a King in the line of David, to the promised coming of the Messiah in Daniel and in other prophecies.

And all of those testimonies of Jesus were climaxed with that great identification, “You are my beloved son.”

From our perspective, there was a certain necessity in that identification because, after all, God is invisible. God is a spirit, he has not a body like man. And he is therefore unseen, by the eye of man. Unseeable.

John 1:18 “No one has seen God at any time.”

And,

John 6:46 “Not that anyone has seen the Father, except He who is from God; He has seen the Father.”

And we read in 1 Tim.6:16 that God,

1 Tim.6:16 “...alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen.”

Therefore,

B. The father, who is unseen, makes himself known in Jesus his Son.

Again,

John 1:18 “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”

Jesus, in the flesh, reveals his father, for Jesus is the word which became flesh. Jesus is God in the flesh.

And in the flesh of Jesus, God the father makes himself known. God reveals himself. God, who has no form in himself, who has no visible or physical existence in himself. And so we read,

v.37

And as with the other witnesses, this one was also rejected.

v.38

Then I want you to notice where Jesus turns for the fourth and final witness of himself. He turns to the Scriptures, and makes reference to,

IV. THE WITNESS OF THE SCRIPTURES.

v.39

There is at least the possibility that verse 39 ought to be translated into English in the imperative, that is, as a command. “Search the Scriptures.” The form of the Greek verb could be either way, but I believe the command better suits this context, which a context of rebuke to the Jews for their unbelief.

This wasn't simply an academic exercise about the various witnesses that testify about Jesus Christ. This isn't an exercise in religious philosophy or in the theory of logic. Jesus was not merely attempting to convey true information to these Jews. He wasn't trying to win a case as if he were a lawyer in a court of law. He was trying to give them life.

We have already seen that Jesus is life. And gives life.

John 5:21

Also,

John 1:4 “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.”

So here he says to the Jews, “Search the Scriptures, for in them you have eternal life.”

In that verse, verse 39, there is no uncertainty or no sarcasm or irony in the use of the English word “think,” “in them you think you have eternal life.” It is rather to be understood, I believe, “You yourselves think, and think rightly, it is one of the articles of your faith, that you have in the Scriptures the way to eternal life pointed out.”

Jesus isn’t emphasizing any sort of uncertainty, but was appealing to their own conviction that the Scriptures, which at this time consisted of the Old Testament alone, were the Word of God. Jesus is appealing to the Jewish belief that the word of God was the word of God. And so Jesus says, “Search them.” Because in them is life.

And then comes the challenge.

v.39b “These are they which testify of me.”

That’s were the problem was! That’s were they were challenged, and rebuked. They believed that the Scriptures which they had, the Scriptures of the Old Testament, were the word of life. And as far as that went, they were correct. But what they had failed to see, and what Jesus would exhort them to see, was that,

A. The life which is promised in the Scriptures is found in Jesus.

v.39

Before I go on with the rebuke Jesus offers to them for their unbelief, let me answer the question “how.” “How do the Scriptures of the Old Testament promise life in Jesus?”

Do you remember what Jesus would later say to the men on the Road to Emmaus, after his resurrection?

Luke 24:27 “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”

There are many passages which speak of the life which is promised in Jesus.

Deut.18:18 “I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.”

And also,

2 Sam.7:12 “When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be his Father, and he shall be My son... 16 And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever.”

Then, of course, there are prophecies such as,

Is.7:14 “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.”

And,

Is.9:6 “For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of His government and peace There will be no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice

From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”

And,

Is.53:2 “For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, And as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, There is no beauty that we should desire Him. 3 He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. 4 Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

Those are words of life.

There were also ordinances miracles which would be types of Christ in the Old Testament, the water coming from the rock, the brazen serpent. We read of some of them in,

1 Cor.12:1 “Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, 2 all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.”

And we’ll study in the next chapter of John,

John 6:49 “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. 50 This is the bread which comes down from heaven,

that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.”

In Jesus, there is life. And in the Scriptures of the Old Testament as well as the new, there is Jesus. And without Jesus, there is no life.

1 John 5:11 “This is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

So there are the witnesses. All four of them, quite a powerful and dramatic testimony to Jesus Christ.

But it isn’t enough. Those four witnesses aren’t enough to cause people to believe. At least, they weren’t enough for the people to whom Jesus spoke.

v.40

“You are not willing.”

It wasn’t that the witness wasn’t clear enough. It wasn’t that the witness wasn’t persuasive enough. It wasn’t that the witness wasn’t convincing. It was that the people weren’t willing!

J.C. Ryle writes this. “And now [Jesus] concludes by a most heart-piercing appeal to the consciences of his enemies, in which he exposes the true state of their hearts, and the real reasons why they did not believe in him...Ye do not will to come,”--Ye have no heart, desire, or inclination to come.”

And why is that? John has already told us.

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. 17 “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. 18 “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. 20 “For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.”

They wouldn’t believe because they loved their sin! They wouldn’t believe the testimony of the Scriptures because their deeds were sinful.

And so it is today, isn’t it? Why is it that people reject the Christ of the Scriptures? Why is that people reject the Bible as the infallible and inerrant word of God? Why is that people will not come to the light which is revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ?

Why is it that people remain in unbelief unto death and are judged unto an eternity of destruction in the burning fire of hell? Why? Because they love their sin!

B. Sinful men deny the witness of the Scriptures to their own destruction.

Notice how John so thoroughly and so completely exposes and lays bare the sinfulness of man. First, as I’ve already said, he exposes their sinful lack of will.

v.39-40

Why? Why do they reject Christ? Why do they choose to

refuse to come to Christ in faith and repentance? Why? A lack of love. That’s why. They do not love God!

v.41-42

And the fact that they do not love God is made obvious by the fact that they love the praise of men. They love to receive honor from men.

v.43-44

They cared more about the praise and honor of men than about the praise and honor of God. And so they would not come to salvation. They would not come to life. They would not come to Jesus, as he was revealed in Scripture.

Now, let this sink into your hearts deeply, for there is, in each one of us, I believe, this awful desire to win the approval of men. We like to be liked, don’t we. We like to gain the approval of others, other men. And so we give ourselves diligently to that pursuit, simply wanting to be loved by others.

But as an ultimate end in life, that is a totally empty pursuit. For the Scriptures confront and rebuke everyone of us at this point. We must live and act solely for the honor and glory of God. To win HIS approval.

Paul would put it this way,

Ga 1:10 “For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.”

So think about your own heart, and your own desire to be honored by men. Then repent of that desire, and pray that God would give you a longing to be honored by him. And ultimately, by him alone! Pray that your chief desire, your chief and highest

goal in life, would be to win God's approval by your loving obedience, knowing that your relationship with him was secured not by anything you do, but by the blood of his Son which was shed upon the cross.

So without losing any sense that you are justified by faith, and by faith alone, without losing any sense that you have been adopted into his family and been given all the rights and privileges of the children of God by faith, pray for this innermost desire to please God and concern yourself with obtaining his approval and not the approval of men.

And realize that that sin is of seeking the approval and praise of men is preeminent in those who refuse to embrace Christ!
v.44

And so, Jesus said to those Jews who believed in Moses, they would be judged by Moses. For their unbelief. For there is no distinction between Moses and Jesus!
v.45-47

Now, let me say this. Those are powerful words to those who claim that there are errors in the OT. They are powerful words of condemnation to those who claim, for example, that although they claim to be followers of Christ they believe that the first books of the Bible weren't written by Moses.

How can that be? Moses wrote about Jesus. The old testament is about Jesus. Everything in it points to Jesus, and without Jesus, it is empty and vain.

Moses wrote about Jesus. And it certainly true that if you would believe what Moses wrote, if you would really believe it, then you would also believe in Jesus. And if you refuse to believe

in the word of God in the OT, if you refuse to believe in the truthfulness of what Moses wrote, then you have no claim to believe in Jesus.

That is such a damning judgment of those who reject the truthfulness of God's word, isn't it? The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament testify of Jesus, and you can't have one without the other, for Moses wrote about Christ.

God's word is true, and it is a true witness to Jesus Christ. And therefore, in that word, there is life.

So there you have it, four witnesses. Jesus himself. John the Baptist. God the father. And the Bible. Surely the truth of the matter is established by the testimony of those four. And yet the real issue is the matter of your heart. May each one of you have a heart ready and willing to believe those witnesses, that you might receive the honor that comes from the only God.