

Christ Vindicated

John 12:44-50

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“For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment – what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me” (Jn. 12:49-50).

The expression “the passion of Christ,” is usually reserved to describe Jesus’ ordeal in suffering on the cross. Yet all through this Gospel, John has frequently presented Jesus’ passion, in the sense of his emotional response to people and events. It certainly was a passionate Jesus who took a whip and drove the money-changers out of the temple in John 1. And it was a passionate Jesus who stood amidst the festival attendees and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink” (Jn. 7:37). Because of his zeal for the Father’s glory and his love for sinners, Jesus was anything but dispassionate in his earthly ministry.

As we conclude John 12, we arrive at the main transition in John’s Gospel. The first twelve chapters are referred to as the “Book of Signs,” since they present Jesus’ ministry in terms of seven great miracles. Chapter 13 begins the “Book of the Passion,” detailing the events of the cross and resurrection. As we now consider the final words recorded by John prior to his account of the events of the cross, we are not surprised to find great passion in them.

Jesus’ public teaching was now over. After his last appeal to the Jews, John says “he departed and hid himself from them” (Jn. 12:36b). Presumably, Jesus withdrew to the company of his closest disciples, perhaps back with his friends at Bethany. But Jesus was anything but withdrawn from the drama of the occasion. Indeed, it must have been a heart-breaking time, for the words which John wrote

in his prologue had proved true: “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (Jn. 1:11). In the awful passion of this brink of the great storm into which he was about to walk, Jesus vindicates himself against those who soon will condemn him and gives encouragement to those who will remember his words after the cross.

Why Jesus Should Have Been Received

There are only five places in the Gospels where it is recorded that Jesus “cried out.” Two of them arise from his sufferings on the cross (Mt. 27:46, 50; Mk. 15:34). Another was when Jesus appealed to the crowd at the Feast of Tabernacles, calling for them to come to him as the giver of living water (Jn. 7:37). A fourth occasion was when Jesus “cried” out to Lazarus in the tomb, calling him back to life. The fifth occasion is here at the very end of his public ministry, when Jesus responds to the Jews’ final rejection of their Messiah.

Here, Jesus’ passionate concern is not just with the peoples’ failure to believe, but also with the overwhelming reasons why they should have believed. In John 12:44-46, he gives three reasons, starting with the fact that he had come as God’s messenger: “Whoever believes in me,” Jesus cried, “believes not in me but in him who sent me” (Jn. 12:44).

Three times in these final verses of chapter 12, Jesus refers to God as the one who sent him. This truth bears both on Jesus’ credentials and the honor of God that is offended by unbelief. People complain that God does not seem to do anything about the great problems of our world. But in fact he has sent his Son as a messenger of grace and salvation, with good news of salvation. Yet the world rejected him!

It is true that Jesus’ message was surprising and even confrontational. He challenged men like the Pharisees, who were relying on their supposed goodness to win their way to heaven. Jesus’ coming exposed their sin and confronted their false teaching. None of us enjoy having our beliefs corrected and our sins exposed. But the true question is whether Jesus really spoke for God. The answer is that he did, the proof of which was his miracles. By giving sight to the man born blind and then raising Lazarus from the grave, Jesus sufficiently

proved that he had come from God, and it seems clear that the Pharisees realized this. Therefore, their rejection of Christ was a rejection of God.

But there is a second reason why Jesus should be believed, namely, that he reveals God to us. “And whoever sees me sees him who sent me,” Jesus added (Jn. 12:45).

This is the Bible’s answer to the greatest of all questions: “What is God like?” Inevitably, we all ask if God is concerned about us. We wonder what God demands and what he offers. The answers are found in the coming of his Son. Jesus is, Paul wrote, “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), so that by a sincere study of Jesus we learn the great truths about God himself.

Jesus said, “Whoever *sees* me *sees* him who sent me,” using the Greek verb *theoreo*. From this, we get our words *theory* and *theorize*. Jesus did not mean that merely by laying eyes on him we see God, true though that is. Rather, he means that those who studiously reflect on his person and work will come to know God. We learn that God is love by seeing the love of Jesus, especially as he offers himself on the cross. We see what it means that God is holy when we observe Jesus’ actions. Jesus lives out God’s wisdom and displays God’s saving power. John Owen wrote, “In Christ we behold the wisdom, goodness, love, grace, mercy and power of God all working together for the great work of our redemption and salvation.”¹

Man was made by God in his own image. This means that “humanity was designed to be the perfect vehicle for God’s self-expression within this world.”² It was because sin ruined man for this God-imaging role that God sent his Son into the world as a man. In this respect, Jesus not only reveals God to us but he also reveals true humanity. When we see Jesus in the Scriptures, we not only should say, “This is what God is like!” but we should also conclude, “This is what I was meant to be like!” Jesus reveals God by speaking and acting in perfect conformity with the character of God. And the reason Jesus can do this is that he is himself God, fully partaking of the divine nature.

¹ John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, 25.

² N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 70.

The true disgrace of sin is that we who were made to reveal God need to have God revealed to us. We have lost contact with our Maker. So Jesus came to restore to us the knowledge of God and reconcile us to God through the forgiveness of our sins. How great, then, is the tragedy of unbelief. All that is left those who reject Jesus is a godless life of increasing darkness. But the opposite is true of faith in Christ. William Hendriksen summarizes: “Knowing Christ means knowing the Father. Loving Christ means loving the Father. Receiving Christ means receiving the Father. Christ and the Father are one.”³

The third reason Jesus gives for why he should be believed deals with his mission in the world: “I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (Jn. 12:46). He came to lift us out of darkness and bring us into his marvelous light. J. C. Ryle summarizes his meaning: “I have come into a world full of darkness and sin, to be the source and centre of life, peace, holiness, happiness to mankind; so that every one who receives and believes in Me, may be delivered from darkness and walk in full light.”⁴

When we consider these three reasons, we see why Jesus was so grieved that his own people did not receive him. He was sent by God, he revealed God, and he brought light to the world. But the world wanted its own god and so rejected Jesus. If you have not yet believed, will you not face the reality of who and what Jesus is? And if you have believed, then these are reasons why you must press on in faith, despite whatever difficulties you experience in this world.

Unbelief Justly Condemned

Jesus’ tone is not one of vindictive anger but of frustrated good will. But, he knows, the result of unbelief is condemnation. To believe in him is to believe the Father who sent him, to see and understand God, and to be lifted out of darkness. But, Jesus continued, “The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day” (Jn. 12:48).

The purpose of Jesus’ coming was not condemnation. He explains, “If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge

³ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 214.

⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:427.

him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world” (Jn. 12:47). This statement has confused some people because there are other passages that make clear that Jesus will judge the world on the last day. Paul says that Jesus will “judge the living and the dead” (2 Tim. 4:1). Jesus himself taught, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (Mt. 25:31-32). It is thus hard to imagine that Jesus was now denying his role in the future judgment. His point, however, is that while rejecting Jesus leads to condemnation, it was not for condemnation that he came: “I did not come to judge the world but to save the world,” he says (Jn. 12:47).

Jesus likely has the Pharisees specifically in mind, along with other Jews who heard and understood his message and yet denied him. Therefore he says that the message they rejected will judge them: “The word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day” (Jn. 12:48). Jesus uses the word *rhema*, which indicates his actual words, rather than merely the substance of his meaning. Jesus’ words will be used in the final judgment of those who have refused him. People who have never heard the gospel will be judged for all their sins (see Rev. 20:12). But those who rejected the gospel will especially be judged for the words of grace that they spurned. They will be made to remember that Jesus declared himself to be “the light of the world” as they enter the absolute and eternal darkness earned by their unbelief.

From this we may draw some important applications. The first is that we should realize that there will be a “last day” (Jn. 12:48). Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments:

From beginning to end the message of the Bible... is that there is to be an end to the world, and that the end is judgment. The Christ of God will come back into this world and he will return to judge it... The world is under judgement. And it is going to perish. All that is opposed to God is going to be judged and it is going to be destroyed... There is a day coming when astonished humanity is going to hear this cry: 'Babylon is fallen, is fallen' (Rev. 14:8).⁵

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Cross*, 102.

If this is true, then we should live with the judgment day in mind. Those who are not able to face that day should search for a Savior, in which case Jesus Christ alone can speak good news. He alone died for the forgiveness of our sins. But even we who have found salvation should live in light of the great coming day. If the unbelieving world seems so happy and well off, we should not envy but remember that the end of it all is near. We should live for the things of heaven, “for the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31).

Secondly, Jesus makes plain that unbelievers are responsible for their rejection of his gospel. Earlier, he taught, “This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:19). This means that at the back of unbelief is a moral cause. At the end, the root cause of unbelief is “We will not have this man to be king over us.” People want to be their own master, so they reject the lordship of Christ. Why else would they have crucified a man who went about healing and teaching light? Why else would people not want the holy life to which Christians are called? The reason is that unbelievers are too committed to self and sin. So even while Jesus can prove to have come from God, while Jesus meets our greatest need by showing us God, and while Jesus shines light to lift us out of darkness, people yet will not bend to him the knee. For this they are responsible. As A. W. Pink wrote, “Every man who hears the Gospel *ought* to believe in Christ, and those who do not will yet be punished for this unbelief.”⁶

To hear the gospel is to be responsible to God for your response; on the last day, God will vindicate Christ’s gospel and hold to account those who held it in contempt. Jesus once called out: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you” (Mt. 11:21-22). The same point was made by an old minister who wrote a book of instruction in Christian truth. At the end he asked what would happen to one who disregarded the gospel contained in his book. He answered that condemnation would surely result to those who would not believe, and then he concluded, “and so much the more because

⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 695.

thou hast read this book.”⁷ So it is for everyone who hears the teaching of Jesus’ salvation: you are responsible for all your sins, but especially for rejecting the gospel that you have heard.

Jesus’ Ultimate Vindication

It was the eve of Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, and his last words are meant to prove his ultimate vindication: “For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me” (Jn. 12:49-50). With these words, John draws the curtain on the first half of his Gospel, the Book of Signs.

People have different opinions of Jesus and the New Testament. But Jesus has asked and demanded nothing more than what God the Father has authorized him to ask and demand. Does it seem extreme for Jesus to call for faith in him as Son of God and Savior? Then realize that God has authorized him to call for such faith. Does it bother you that Christianity insists that salvation comes only through Jesus? (Acts 4:12). But this claim is made by the authority of God himself, who has provided no other Savior.

Christians need to claim this same authority when speaking to the world. Too often we debate matters of truth and morality in accordance with the world’s standards. In arguing against abortion, some Christians will try to show the economic value of an increased birthrate. When arguing against homosexuality, they will present a sociological or psychological argument. But these arguments, even when true, lack authority. Christians should instead speak forth the Word of God, unashamedly pointing out the teaching of Holy Scripture, which comes with the authority of God himself. Especially when presenting the gospel of salvation, we should avoid arguing on the basis of worldly benefits, but should do speak in such a way as to be able to say with Jesus: “I have not spoken on my own authority,” but on the authority of God. Then, even if the world rejects us, God will vindicate all we have said on his behalf.

⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:158.

Secondly, Jesus vindicated himself by the character of his message: “And I know that his commandment is eternal life” (Jn. 12:50). We might say this broadly about the whole teaching of God’s Word. God’s Word is life and it is light. To turn from our sins and seek the way of God is to set ourselves upon the path of blessing that leads to everlasting life. Whether we are speaking about moral standards in general, our conduct in marriage and the family, our performance of duties as citizens, or our interactions with other people, God’s Word vindicates itself by the fruit it bears. Therefore, Psalm 1 says of the man or woman who delights in the law of the Lord: “He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers” (Ps. 1:3).

But Jesus probably has the gospel specifically in mind. After all, what commandment especially determines eternal life? It is the command to believe on Jesus. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Earlier, Jesus was asked, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” He replied, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (Jn. 6:28-29).

We customarily express the gospel as an invitation from God, and rightly so. But it is also true that God demands that men and women receive his Son. When preaching to the Athenians, Paul noted God’s patience over the ages with rebel mankind. But with the coming of his own Son, Paul said, “now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). James Boice comments: “This is not something to be toyed with; this is not something to be delayed. God is our master, and he orders us to turn from sin and to respond to him.”⁸

Our postmodern world likes to make sport of nearly every failing of the church and of Christians over the years. Yet the record still stands that the spread of Christianity has literally brought life, light, and freedom throughout the world. Even today, it is Christian faith that prompts the greatest amount of charitable giving and works of mercy throughout the world. Each of us should commit to being lifesavers, peace-makers, and help-givers, to show that God’s commands bring life. And especially we should spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, God’s commandment that brings eternal life.

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:992.

Lastly, Jesus vindicated himself by his obedience to the Father's will: "What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me" (Jn. 12:50). Jesus might have said this about every aspect of his entire life. What he said, what he did, where he went, and how he lived was always "as the Father has told me." His ultimate vindication is his obedience to the Father.

The story is told of a virtuoso pianist who performed his first concert at Carnegie Hall. The crowd was awed by his playing and demanded an encore. Afterwards, nearly the entire audience rose to their feet cheering. But when asked to go out and take a final bow, the pianist refused. When challenged about this, he peered between the curtains and pointed to a small man in the balcony who remained seated. He said, "Do you see that one man up there. When he stands up and applauds, then I will take my bow." "But it is only one man?" they replied. "Why will you not take your bow until that one man applauds?" "Because that man is my teacher," the pianist replied.

So it was with Jesus, who ultimately vindicated himself by his obedience to the will of God the Father. The world might hate him – and it did – and might scoff at his teaching – and it still does – but he would content himself with the applause of one person only: his heavenly Father. And throughout his ministry, the Father gave his applause to Jesus over and over. In fact, earlier that very day God had audibly expressed his approval from heaven. Jesus, feeling great anxiety over the cross, prayed, "Father, glorify your name." And the Father spoke from above: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." That was all the vindication Jesus ever needed.

The same should be true for us. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). So let us resolve to speak and live in such a manner as to be able to say, "What I have done, I have done as God has taught me in his Word." If we can say that, we will not need the applause of the world and we will not fear its scorn. For in the end it will be revealed that only One's opinion really matters, the God who holds eternity in his hand and gives eternal life to all who receive his beloved Son.