

“The Man of Truth”

Introduction: A couple of summers ago, when Rama and the girls were staying for an extended time at our home in N.H., Rama offered to cut the grass so I wouldn't have to do so when I arrived on a particular Father's Day afternoon. I said great, that would be a nice gift! And it would have been, had Rama filled our mower with gas. Instead, she grabbed the wrong can from the shed and filled the mower with the gas and oil mixture intended only for the chain saw and string trimmer. Needless to say, the mower quickly quit on us and the carburetor got so fouled up that we eventually had to replace it, and finally the entire mower itself.

That lawnmower illustrates what the great English writer, C.S. Lewis, calls, in his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, the “key to history.” Lewis reminds us that God designed the human machine to run on himself. That the pure fuel of his Spirit, and nothing else, is the fuel our spirits were made to burn and so, therefore, we cannot expect to have either joy or peace apart from being in relationship with him. However, we certainly try. We believe the lie that we can “be like gods,” that we can be our own masters and live however we like, with no real consequence. Sadly, much of human history—in particular, the poverty and slavery, war and persecution—is the result of human beings trying to live apart from God and pursue their own desires. As Lewis puts it, “Terrific energy is expended—civilizations are built up—excellent institutions devised; but each time something goes wrong. Some fatal flaw always brings the selfish and cruel people to the top and it all slides back into misery and ruin” (p. 54).

And yet, through it all, God is gracious and has not left us to ourselves. Most remarkably, the Christian witness is that this God has come to walk among us in one particular man, a man who came to forgive us when we try to do the right thing but don't, a man who came to show us and provide the fuel for living the life that is truly life, and a man who said he was going to return at the end of time to bring absolute and final justice to the world.

Puzzling over this man, Jesus, is where we find ourselves in John's gospel. Jesus has been doing some beautiful and remarkable things, but many are still having a difficult time seeing who he truly is. Some consider him to be a politician, others say he's a “good man,” still others a “deceiver,” and some even consider him to be “demon possessed.” Such diversity of opinion is present now as well as then. Who is Jesus? Why would we follow him? Understanding who he is might just go a long way toward helping us follow where he leads. Jesus calls us to “judge correctly” (v. 24). What is helpful about the opening section of John 7 in this discernment process is that it gives us a number of things Jesus is not.

I. Jesus is Not A Politician

A. Jesus is not someone who had come to run for political office, to assume an earthly throne. Interestingly his brothers, who struggled with understanding his identity, thought this might be his calling. As the chapter opens, it has been six months since the celebration of the Passover Festival, which was the background of John 6. Jesus has been hanging around in Galilee (the north) and avoiding Judea and Jerusalem (the south) because he knows the depth of the hostility that awaits him there. Last time he was in Jerusalem, you recall, he had healed a man on the Sabbath, revealing that he and the Father were one, that he, Jesus, was the very essence of God, a claim deserving the death penalty as far as the religious leaders were concerned (John 5).

B. But his brothers, who at least acknowledge that Jesus has miraculous power, encourage him to go back to Jerusalem for the next of the feasts to be celebrated, the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, a fall harvest festival. What was their reason for encouraging Jesus? “No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret” (v. 4). It seems that his brothers saw themselves as a kind of self-appointed political action committee. “You need a bigger arena, Jesus. If you want to leverage your power you can’t remain out here in the sticks. You’ve got to go where the people are; You’ve got to advertise. You need to rally your followers and show the world what you can do. This feast is the perfect time for you because everyone will be there!” And all of that would have been well and good, if Jesus had come to run for political office. But he wasn’t seeking to be an earthly ruler, either by popular vote, or by force (cf. 6:15). The time for a public display would come—at the shocking venue of a cross—but it wasn’t yet here.

II. Nor is He A Good Man, Deceiver, or Demon-Possessed

A. Later, Jesus would go up to the feast, but quietly, to teach, not to grandstand. At the feast, John tells us that there was “widespread whispering” about him which reveals a few more pieces of who Jesus is not, ranging from “he is a good man,” to “no, he deceives people,” to “you are demon-possessed!”

Perhaps the most surprising of these is the fact that Jesus is not simply a “good man,” or great moral teacher. Many, of course, give that answer today. To be sure, Jesus is good, and moral, and a wonderful and challenging teacher. But if we take his claims seriously, he couldn’t possibly be just that. Simply a good man would never claim to be one in essence with the Father. We would call that man a lunatic. Simply a good man would not talk so much about himself and the need of others to follow him. We would call that man an egotist. And simply a good man would not claim to be able to forgive sins, not just those committed directly against him but also those committed against others. We would call that man a liar. Each of these claims would be preposterous, and not anything near what simply a good man would claim, unless of course this man was really God.

Illustration: As C.S. Lewis so famously put it, “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice, Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. . .let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to” (*Mere Christianity*, p. 56).

B. So, what about the claim that Jesus is a deceiver, that he deliberately came to fool people? Or, that the church made up all these things about him, even inventing his claims, to deceive others and gain power over others, as folks as recently as Dan Brown subliminally but certainly suggest? As far as the church being the source of the deception, most of the NT was written within the lifetime of those who hung around Jesus, heard him speak, and saw his incredible power. If anything had been made up, these eyewitnesses could have quickly straightened the attempted deception out. As for Jesus making such things up, he gently but directly gives his listeners in any age this challenge: “Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own” (v. 17). In other words, Jesus is saying, “If you follow me, and start doing what I say and living how I live, you will soon see that I know what life is really all about. You will see that I am the fuel on which you were made to run. You will see that I am the key to history. You will see that I seek not my own glory but that of the one who sent me. You will come to know that I am the man of truth.”

C. A final charge, flung from the crowd, is that Jesus was demon-possessed, that he was somehow inhabited by an alternative, evil spirit which was making him say and do crazy things. Actually, if we carefully examine his life, especially how he interacted with others, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Jesus is the sanest man who ever lived. He spoke with quiet authority, always seemed in control of the situation, and was never surprised or rattled. To this demon-possessed charge, Jesus actually explained on another occasion that if he truly were under the influence of the demonic and its kingdom then it would actually be working against itself because all that Jesus did went toward destroying that kingdom of evil and bringing the healing and wholeness of the kingdom of God (Mk. 3:22-26). As he pushed back on the religious leaders who had a problem with his having healed on the Sabbath, Jesus argued that he had simply come to fulfill what the commandment of circumcision pointed to, namely, the healing of the whole man.

III. Jesus Is . . . Trustworthy

A. So if Jesus is not a politician, if he is not a deceiver or demon-possessed, if he is even not just a good man, who and what is he? John will continue to unfold this for us in the chapters ahead. What we might say at this point is that Jesus is indeed the man of truth (v. 18), he is pure unmixed fuel, he is trustworthy in what he says regarding what we need and how we are to live. To put it another way, we can rest on his authority.

Illustration: To return to C.S. Lewis once again, he suggests that ninety-nine percent of the things we believe we believe on authority. That is, we believe because we have been told them by someone who we think is trustworthy. I believe there is a place called Paris, not because I've seen it but because people I trust have been there and told me about it. I believe the Red Sox lost the game yesterday, not because I saw the game (or just assume that the probability is high that they'll have lost!) but because I read about the game from a trustworthy source. I believe in the resurrection of Jesus not because I saw it but because the writers who report that the tomb was empty are credible, because their reporting in turn was supported by those who saw Jesus alive again.

So, no matter what stage of the spiritual journey you may be on, think about Jesus. If he's not a politician or a deceiver, if he's neither demon-filled nor just a good man, might he be worth trusting? And if he's worth trusting, might he be worth following? And will we put what he says into practice? For really what he claims is that he is the fuel on which our lives were made to run.