

The Two Edges of the Truth

M. W. Bassford

4-27-08

Introduction.

- A. As a preacher, my first duty is to preach the truth of the gospel. As I do this, though, it's not usually my goal to be so offensive about this that my audience becomes my enemies. After all, if I make the whole congregation so mad that no one comes back ever again, I've lost any further opportunity to influence you. I suspect that most preachers throughout the brotherhood likewise do not intend to offend their hearers.
- B. However, on at least one memorable occasion, that's exactly what the goal of Jesus was. Look at the amazing contrast between John 8:30 and John 8:59. This is the same group of people. They start out believing in Jesus and His word, but after a fairly short conversation, they're so mad at Him that they attempt to stone Him to death. Consider, folks, that it's Jesus who generated this reaction, and He was the greatest public speaker the world has ever seen. If one of Jesus' audiences had that reaction, it's because Jesus goaded them to it.
- C. Why would Jesus do such a thing? Why would He take people who were at least outwardly interested in the gospel and incite them to attempted murder? How does that fit in with our notions of the gentle, loving, Jesus? The answer is actually quite simple. Jesus dealt with these Jews in this way because they gave Him no other options. Although they were curious about Jesus' message, their hearts were already so hardened that they were incapable of hearing it. Because Jesus could not convert them, He did the next best thing: He forced them to confront their own evil so that perhaps in future they might repent. Let's look at the way that Jesus deals with His audience on this occasion. Let's look at how they're cut with the two edges of the truth.

I. John 8:31-38.

- A. Although it's not immediately apparent, this whole exchange is doomed from the start, and what dooms it is what Jesus says in John 8:31-33. To us, Jesus' words here seem innocuous enough, and indeed even quite natural. These are Jews who believe in Him and are hanging around wanting to hear more from Him, so He tells them what they have to do to become His disciples. They have to not just hear His word, but continue to practice it. That's almost a duh statement. After all, how else would a true disciple receive the word of his master? By ignoring it? Of course not! Every one of us is a disciple of Jesus only to the extent that we obey.
- B. That's not the problem. The problem is what Jesus says about the consequences of discipleship in the next verse. One of the consequences is obvious: they'll know the truth because of what Jesus says. The second consequence, though, is deadly problematic. Jesus tells them that the truth they learn will make them free.
- C. As Jesus no doubt expected, right here is where the Jews' hackles rise a little bit. They're listening to Jesus because they think He's interesting, not because they think they need something, and especially not because they think they need something as basic as freedom. You can almost hear them getting a little bit huffy as they declare, "We're Abraham's descendants, and we've never been enslaved to anyone!" With that one automatic response, they show that they don't understand Jesus, and that they wouldn't want Him if they did.
- D. Want to know the reason why most people won't become Christians? This right here is it. They won't become Christians because they think they don't need Jesus. They don't seek the riches of Christ because they don't recognize their own poverty of spirit. They don't seek freedom in Him because they don't see that they're enslaved. They don't seek to be clothed in Christ because they don't recognize the shamefulfulness of their own sins. Folks, this can be a problem for "members of the church" just as it can be for anyone. We need to have a daily consciousness of how much we need Jesus; otherwise, we're in the same boat as these Jews.
- E. Jesus responds to this huffy rejoinder in John 8:34-38. He points out that whether they want to recognize it or not, they are enslaved to their sins. He also points out that as slaves, their only hope is through the Son of the house, who alone has the power to free them and make it stick. Despite their claims, they do need Him.
- F. As if this weren't bad enough, Jesus begins to draw a line between Him and His audience. For one thing, He accuses them of seeking to kill Him. Of course, He's right about this; the Jews just aren't going to realize it for another twenty verses or so. Second, He tells them that His word has no place in them. They've already demonstrated this by their lack of interest in freedom through Him. Finally, He says that He and the Jews are serving two different fathers: He, His Father in heaven; they, a father whom Jesus hasn't named yet.

II. John 8:39-47

- A. Predictably, the Jews rise to the bait. We see the next exchange in John 8:39-41. As they have been, they brag a little bit more on Abraham as their father. In response to this, Jesus draws an interesting distinction. He's already acknowledged that they have Abraham's blood in their veins, but Abraham is still not their father. Unlike the Jews, Abraham loved and obeyed God. Because these Jews want to kill Jesus, even though He came from God and told them the truth, they show that they are the spiritual descendants of someone else.

- B. This is an important lesson for us too, friends. It is not our words, but our actions, that show who our true father is. If we go through our lives talking about God this and God that, but we live in the same way as the lying, immoral, evil-hearted people of the world, we demonstrate that we don't give God the respect that one of His genuine children would. If we are truly children of God, friends, we need to do the deeds of God.
- C. Now, here is where things get nasty. When the Jews say, "We aren't born of fornication," they aren't plucking that out of the air at random. Instead, they're casting a slur on Jesus' parentage. Apparently, they knew the chronology of the birth of Jesus, and they're accusing Mary of having slept around to produce Him. Jesus, they imply, is illegitimate, unlike these proud Jews who, ironically enough, now claim God for their Father.
- D. Jesus, naturally, does not appreciate this, and we see how much He doesn't appreciate this in His words in John 8:42-47. As the Jews are about to learn, Jesus is much better at the art of invective than they are. No, He says, actually, they aren't from God, because if they were from God, they would love Him. Jesus is not the product of some one-night stand; instead, He proceeds from the Father Himself. Rather than being a disgraceful thing, His parentage is of the highest order, and those who say otherwise are slanderers.
- E. Now that He's defended Himself, He returns to the attack. They don't understand Him because they're not listening, and they aren't listening because they are children of the devil. This is Jesus' response to the fornication barb, and, as He goes on to demonstrate, this accusation has the added sting of being true. Just like the devil is a murderer and a liar, these Jews want to kill Jesus and have already lied about Him. They are therefore imitating the devil. These proud wannabe sons of Abraham are actually children of the devil.
- F. In fact, Jesus continues, their conduct shows just how far gone they are. Jesus speaks the truth, but they don't believe the truth. They have absolutely no reason to reject Him; not one of them can point to anything sinful that He's said or done, yet they reject Him anyway because He is of God and they aren't.
- G. This is another way, friends, that we ourselves need to examine our spiritual parentage. People who are of God hear the words of God. They listen to what the Bible says. Anybody who hears anything before the Bible, whether it be scientific dogma, or church tradition, or a creed book, or a popular preacher, is not truly one of God's children. This goes for us, too. We need to listen to the Bible, no matter what it tells us.

III. John 8:48-59.

- A. For the Jews, these words of Jesus mean that He has officially put Himself on their enemies list, and we see what happens next in John 8:48-51. They're so mad now that they don't even bother with innuendo. They continue to insult Jesus' mother by accusing her of having had relations with a Samaritan, and they say that Jesus Himself is demonically possessed, or, in our idiom, howl-at-the-moon crazy.
- B. Jesus' response to this is, considering the circumstances, quite restrained. He says He's not crazy, which the Jews themselves know, and rather than a disgrace to His mother, His existence is an honor to His Father, and the Jews, by saying anything else, are just slinging mud. At this point, we see Jesus trying to redirect the conversation to something more useful. When He says that there is One who seeks and judges, He's saying, "OK, enough about me. Enough with the parentage comments. Let's talk about something meaningful." He does exactly that, with His next statement, that those who keep His word will never see death.
- C. By this point in time, though, the Jews are no longer interested in rational discourse. You would think that the promise of eternal life would get their attention, but even that doesn't work. Their rejoinder and Jesus' commentary on it show up in John 8:52-56. They present this divine promise as evidence of Jesus' insanity. If Abraham died, and the prophets died, then just what kind of big shot is Jesus claiming to be, that even His followers will never die? They're not really interested in the answer. They just want to make Jesus look bad.
- D. Nonetheless, Jesus answers their question. He explains that the point is not really whether He's glorifying Himself or not, but whether the Father has glorified Him. In other words, if Jesus is just some kind of bum with big ideas about Himself, the Jews are right to ignore Him. Of course, that's not what happened. Instead, God confirmed Jesus' divine origin with the miracles that Jesus worked, that obviously could not have come from any source other than God. If Jesus is truly God's messenger, then the Jews can't simultaneously claim to love God and hate Him. Even more than that, if Jesus truly is from God, He doesn't even have the right to remain silent about God. He's a messenger sent to proclaim God's will, and He has to do His job. He rounds off this exchange with the statement that Abraham right now is glad to see Jesus doing God's work, which, if the Jews had stopped to think about it, would have told them that someone could both die and not die.
- E. Of course, the Jews don't think. They don't consider the implications of Jesus' response and just sneer at Him instead. We see the final segment of this conversation in John 8:57-59. They mock Jesus for claiming to have seen Abraham even though He's not 50 yet. That wasn't what Jesus was talking about, but it still happens to be true, and Jesus tells them how true it is by His claim that "before Abraham was, I am." This is an obvious reference to God's self-description from the burning bush in Exodus 3, and the Jews recognize it for exactly what it is. Rather than believing Jesus, though, they attempt to stone Him, and the conversation ends.

Conclusion. At the end of the day, this is where our conversation with Jesus has to end too. Either we have to acknowledge that He is God and the Son of God, or we have to reject Him utterly. If we acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, we are bound to obey Him. On the other hand, if we reject Him, we doom ourselves. Which will you choose?