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Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

Who Is This Man?

John 7

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series: Come and See

We are continuing our study of the biography of Jesus, written by his best friend John, and today we come to chapter 7. As I've read and studied the passage this week it really struck me, Jesus really didn't care at all about what others think of him. Have you ever noticed that? Even in the face of intense persecution, with people wanting to arrest and kill him, Jesus went about his business and no one's opinions seemed to stop him. His commitment and focus was on doing the will of God and completing the work God gave him to do. Sure, he was sensitive to people's needs and very compassionate, but when push came to shove, he never let the fear of man or the pressure from the crowd interfere with his mission to rescue and redeem a broken and fallen world.

Do you fear what others think? I sure do. Just tell me my sermon sucks today and I might cry! It's a daily struggle for all of us. Author Jessie Rice wrote about this in, "An Open Letter to My Fear of What Others Think."

Dear Fear-Of-What-Others-Think:

I am sick of you, and it's time we broke up. I know we've broken up and gotten back together many times, but seriously, Fear-Of-What-Others-Think, this is it. We're breaking up.

I'm tired of over-thinking my status updates on Facebook, trying to sound more clever, funny, and important. I'm sick of feeling anxious about what I say or do in public, especially around people I don't know that well, all in the hope that they'll like me, accept me, praise me. I run around all day feeling like a Golden Retriever with a full bladder: Like me! Like me! Like me!

Because of you, I go through my day with a cloud of shame hanging over my head, and I never stop acting. The spotlight's always on, and I'm center stage, and I'd better keep dancing, posturing, mugging, or else the spotlight will move, and I'll dissolve into a little, meaningless puddle on the ground, just like that witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. I can never live up to the expectations of my imaginary audience, the one that lives only in my head but whose collective voice is louder than any other voice in the universe.

And all of this is especially evil because if I really stop and think about it, and let things go quiet and listen patiently for the voice of the God who made me and the Savior who died for me, in his eyes, it turns out I'm actually—profoundly—precious, lovable, worthy, valuable, and even just a little

ghetto-fabulous. When I find my true identity in Christ, then you turn back into the tiny, yapping little dog that you are.

So eat it, Fear-Of-What-Others-Think. You and I are done. And no, I'm not interested in "talking it through." I'm running, jumping, laughing you out of my life, once and for all. Or at least, that's what I really, really want, God help me.

Don't you love that? Here in chapter 7 Jesus will be confronted with a barrage of "what-others-think." He'll hear the opinions of his brothers, the confusion of the crowds, and of course the angry reaction from the Jewish authorities. John, as he writes this, sweeps us through three scenes during one of the most popular religious festivals in Jerusalem, the Festival of Tabernacles. It's a long chapter and we won't be able to discuss every verse. What we'll see is just how divided the audience was when it came to Jesus.

Let me take a second to explain The Festival of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of Booths. It was the last of three important celebrations for Israel and Jews would travel from all over to Jerusalem to celebrate. Tabernacles celebrated the autumn harvest. Since the crop in autumn had to be protected, Israelite farmers built temporary shelters or booths in the fields and lived in them. The symbolism goes back to scared history when the Israelites built temporary shelters during their 40 years of wandering in the desert. The festival was observed for seven days and celebrated with animal sacrifices and temple ceremonies.

At this festival everyone had their own opinion about Jesus. Everyone's talking about him and most of what they are saying is way off. Even today people study and discuss who the real Jesus is. And just like in Jesus' time the reviews are mixed. Why was there such confusion about who Jesus is then and now? And why did the claims of Jesus so often split audiences into those who believe and those who didn't? Those are some of the questions we'll try and answer this morning. Let's read first about the unbelief of Jesus' brothers.

After this, Jesus went around in Galilee. He did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill him. But when the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles was near, Jesus' brothers said to him, "Leave Galilee and go to Judea, so that your disciples there may see the works you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are

doing these things, show yourself to the world." For even his own brothers did not believe in him.

Therefore Jesus told them, "My time is not yet here; for you any time will do. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that its works are evil. You go to the festival. I am not going up to this festival, because my time has not yet fully come" (John 7:1–8).

The Unbelief of Jesus' Brothers

If you grew up Catholic you may be surprised to hear Jesus had brothers. Mary did not remain a virgin her entire life but had other children. Jesus' brothers were the younger sons of Mary and Joseph. Their names were James, Joseph, Simon and Jude (Mt. 13:55). They wanted Jesus to leave Galilee, go to the festival and do more miracles for the masses. Who in the world does them in secret, they ask? Go make a name for yourself Jesus. Show off. It pays to advertise. The brothers urge Jesus to attend the festival because thousands of people will be in Jerusalem and it's the perfect time and place to go public with their marketing campaign. For the brothers, the miracles of Jesus are making them popular. They are loving all the attention and want more. Who can blame them? Jesus wasn't interested in career advancement or fame; doing the father's will was his priority. Jesus will appear at the festival but only at the right time appointed by the Father.

I am bothered by Jesus' brothers, aren't you? His very own brothers didn't believe in him! Maybe they resented him. Can you imagine growing up with a perfect older brother? They heard Jesus preach, they saw his miracles, but for whatever reason it just wasn't enough for them. For anyone here with family members who are not yet followers of Jesus, you get this. You've tried to share your faith with your family, you've invited them the church, but they don't want anything to do with Jesus. I have family like that. You do too. Let me encourage you to continue to pray, love and share with them. Why? Here's the good news: Jesus' brothers finally did become true followers after his resurrection. They were a work in progress like us. Faith can be a long journey for some.

The Confusion of the Crowd

Jesus arrives secretly at the festival and after a few days he goes to the temple and begins to teach. His arrival brings controversy and division. Listen to the crowd. "*Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him. Some said, 'He is a good man.' Others replied, 'No, he deceives the people'*" (v. 12). Ever walk into a room and have people whisper to others and point fingers? Jesus' presence and popularity is met by most with hostility. Some say he's a deceiver, an impostor, a phony, a fake! Some even took shots below the belt. "*You are demon-possessed,*" *the crowd answered. "Who is trying to kill you?"* (v. 20) You're crazy, you're insane, the crowd shouted. People were so riled up John

writes several times. "*Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him*" (v. 44). Even after the resurrection many Jews continued to believe Jesus was a deceiver who practiced sorcery and led Israel astray. Some today feel that way. One of the things upsetting the Jews is they expected the Messiah to appear suddenly and mysteriously, not walking around at a festival teaching people. They even ask Jesus where he is from and he told them, "I'm from heaven." Sure! Right! This guy is a nut case!

Others at the festival were open and receptive, "He's a good man!" they said. These people regarded Jesus as a man of character and integrity. He's doing good things for people, they reasoned. Others received his teaching with joy. "*Still, many in the crowd believed in him... On hearing his words, some of the people said, 'Surely this man is the Prophet.' Others said, 'He is the Messiah!'*" (verses 31a, 40–41). Jesus was a gifted communicator. People in the crowd hoped he was the Messiah and some believed in him.

There were still others in the crowd who were simply curious. This is one of several questions Jesus was asked. "*The Jews said to one another, 'Where does this man intend to go that we cannot find him?' Will he go where our people live scattered among the Greeks, and teach the Greeks?'*" (v. 35). I call these folks religious questioners. Have you ever met people like that? They love talking about religion and the latest spiritual fads. They enjoy asking questions about Jesus Christ, but deep down they're not really interested. Jesus tells them where he is going they cannot go. This leaves the Jews scratching their heads, wondering what he is talking about. Jews would never go to the Gentiles (Greeks). So, they think Jesus is simply leaving Israel. But, Jesus is talking about where they cannot go, which is heaven, because they refuse to believe in him. You can talk a lot about God and be very open to him and still not know him in a real personal way.

The Religious Leaders' Reaction to Jesus

At the festival both skeptics and believers were divided over Jesus. Even Jesus' brothers don't believe. Surely the religious leaders know who this man is. Unfortunately, their reaction is the worst of all. "*The Jews there were amazed and asked, 'How did this man get such learning without having been taught?' Jesus answered, 'My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me'*" (verses 15–16). Jesus was questioned, "Where did you go to school?" His answer infuriated the religious elite, "I went to school in heaven." Advanced study under a rabbinic scholar in a well known school was absolutely necessary for any self-respecting rabbi. But Jesus didn't go to the right school. According to Jesus, God taught and commissioned him. His diploma was divine and his authority came directly from God. Is this man serious they asked?! Before we jump all over the religious leaders here, let's get in their shoes for a moment. Would you allow a surgeon to operate on you if he only attended a junior college?

No way! Would you sign up for a class in college from a person who dropped out of school? Of course not, unless it was a Silicon Valley billionaire!

Jesus didn't stop there explaining his heavenly schooling, he poured it on, even telling the religious authorities they don't really know God. *"Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, 'Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me'"* (verses 28–29). Think about that for a moment. Out of all the people who should know God it's the religious leaders! They prided themselves in knowing the one true God. It was their spiritual heritage. They were the divine teachers of the law. But Jesus had already told them the law points to himself. To know the law is to know Jesus. To know Jesus is to know God. Yet, instead of loving Jesus and following him, they wanted to kill him.

To be fair, there were people within the religious authorities who believed Jesus and wanted to know him. The temple guards were one of them. *"Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and the Pharisees, who asked them, 'Why didn't you bring him in?' 'No one ever spoke the way this man does,' the guards replied. 'You mean he has deceived you also?' the Pharisees retorted"* (verses 45–47).

Jesus' teaching was so effective that even his enemies were compelled to think differently about him. No man spoke the way Jesus did because he was more than a man. He's the word of God. The universe was created by his word. Jesus teaches with authority, conviction and power. Even Nicodemus, one of their very own, was open to the teachings of Jesus. *"Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, 'Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?'"* (verses 50–51). Nicodemus speaks up to raise a simple point, Jesus has the right to a fair hearing. Nicodemus is a man in process. He's still thinking about the conversation he had with Jesus about being born again.

The anger, hostility and confusion of the religious leaders begs the question, what do they want from Jesus? I think they want Jesus to conform to their understanding of religious observance. They want him to fit into their religious mold. They also want Jesus to recant his claims about an intimate relationship with God the Father. He must deny that he is the Christ, the Messiah. Jesus wouldn't do it. Jesus wasn't a liar; he wasn't a lunatic; he was the Lord of heaven and earth.

John, the writer of this Gospel, did not expect, nor should we, that the debate about Jesus will always be civil. Jesus doesn't want you to water him down or put him on a leash. The reality of the world we live in is the truth of Jesus splits any audience into those who believe and those who refuse to believe. Later in

John 15:18 Jesus will say, *"The world will hate you..."* We need to remember the Good News is not good news for everyone. It won't always get a warm reception. The truth fully explained to someone will often lead to rejection. Just because someone meets an authentic Christian doesn't mean they'll embrace Jesus. This is a sober reminder for us all.

Why do people back then and even today have wrong opinions about Jesus? There are many reasons, so let me highlight a few from this passage. The first is fear. *"But no one would say anything publicly about him for fear of the leaders"* (v. 13). Have you ever been afraid to speak up publicly or share your faith about Jesus? I have. That is why we are told in Scripture to fear God and not man. Another reason people are divided about Jesus is they don't really want to do the will of God. *"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). I love Jesus but I really want to live my life the way I want to. Ever hear that? Ever say that? Doing God's will is a choice. It's a willing desire to do what he wants. When we do the will of God we grow in our understanding of who he is. That's what Jesus is saying here. A Christian must be fundamentally committed to doing his will and his will is found in his word. But what we'll soon find is doing God's will is not easy and it will force us to make hard decisions.

Why do people back then and today have wrong opinions about Jesus? They want personal fame and glory. *"Whoever speaks on their own does so to gain personal glory, but he who seeks the glory of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him"* (v. 18). Like Jesus' brothers there are many people today who treat God like Santa Claus. They want his stuff but they don't want him. The same is true of religious folks. We can live for our own personal glory and not for God's glory. Pastors can get big heads especially as their churches grow. Subtly what we think we are doing for God is really all about serving ourselves.

For other people it's their false judgements that lead to wrong opinions about Jesus. *"Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly"* (v. 24). This should challenge us. Do we look at Jesus and draw conclusions about him based on faulty and superficial ideas of what he should be like? Some of the people were so hung up on the fact that Jesus came from Galilee and they couldn't get over it. *"Still others asked, 'How can the Messiah come from Galilee? Does not Scripture say that the Messiah will come from David's descendants and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?'"* (verses 41b–43). Thus the people were divided because of Jesus." In their line of thinking, prophets didn't come from Galilee. They failed to remember the prophets Jonah and Nahum came from Galilee. Far too often we want to judge Jesus by our own standards of how things should look and be.

French philosopher Voltaire said 300 years ago: "If God has made us in his image, we've returned him the favor."

Since Jesus didn't fear what others think, who did he say he was? Already in John we've seen Jesus as the word, new wine, eternal life, light and the bread of life. In this chapter, Jesus reveals another powerful image about who he is. Let me give you a bit more background about the Festival of Tabernacles. It will be helpful to understand Jesus' powerful words. On the last day of the Festival a portion of water was taken in gold vessels from the pool of Siloam and brought back to the temple. During this procession, the priests would sing Psalm 113–118 as they paraded through the city. The ceremony symbolized the desire for God to bring an abundance of rain the next harvest. Late autumn was a period of drought in Israel. Water was scarce, cisterns were low, and springs were weak. At the festival prayers would be offered for rain. Rainfall during tabernacles was a sign of strong blessing from God in the coming seasons. With that in mind, listen to the loud voice of Jesus. *"On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified"* (verses 37–39).

Jesus has issued an invitation in this passage. It's an invitation extended to all ("Whoever..."). It's for the religious and the irreligious. The insiders and the outsiders. It's for skeptical younger brothers and seekers like Nicodemus. It's an invitation to come to him as the fulfillment of all the Feast of Tabernacles anticipated. He's the source of living water. We just have to come to him and drink. Why is that so difficult for some of us?

In C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* there's a powerful scene in which Jill first meets Aslan, the great lion, by a stream:

"Are you not thirsty?" said the Lion.

"I'm dying of thirst," said Jill.

"Then drink," said the Lion.

"May I—could I—would you mind going away while I do?" said Jill. The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic.

"Will you promise not to do anything to me, if I do come?" said Jill.

"I make no promise," said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.

"Do you eat girls?" she said.

"I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," said the Lion.

"I dare not come and drink," said Jill.

"Then you will die of thirst," said the Lion.

"Oh dear!" said Jill, coming another step nearer. "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then."

"There is no other stream," said the Lion.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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