WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT JESUS?

John 7:1-13

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Dr. James Boice, the late pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, tells (The Gospel of John [Zondervan], 1-vol. ed., p. 471) of when the staff of his radio program went out on the streets of Philadelphia to ask people, “Who is Jesus Christ?” Sometimes they asked, “Do you think Jesus Christ is God?” The answers they received revealed the confusion that many have with regard to those crucial questions.

One young woman responded, “Jesus Christ was a man who thought He was God.” Another young woman, a biology student, replied, “Jesus Christ is pure essence of energy. God to me is energy, electric energy because it’s something that’s not known.” A man answered, “I think that’s something you have to decide for yourself, but He had some beautiful ideas.” Others replied, “He is an individual who lived 2,000 years ago who was interested in the betterment of all classes of people.” “He was well liked; He meant well; He was a good man.” But most people were just confused. They answered, “I haven’t any idea… I don’t know.”

It’s sad that in a country like ours, where anyone can easily hear about Jesus Christ, there could be so many people who don’t know who He is. And if a person does not have a basic knowledge of who Jesus is, then he cannot trust in Him as Savior and Lord. He would be believing in a Jesus of his own imagination. A correct knowledge of who Jesus is must underlie saving faith in Him. And so as John labors to make clear in his Gospel, the crucial question for every person to answer correctly is, “Who is Jesus Christ?” You need to get that one right!

But this is also an important question even for those of us who have already believed in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Just as in human relationships such as marriage there is always room to grow to know the other person more deeply, so it is in our relationship with Jesus Christ. At least 25 years after his conversion, the apostle Paul said that his aim was still, “that I may know Him” (Phil. 3:10). The more deeply we know Jesus Christ for who He is, the more
quickly we will submit to Him as the Lord of our every thought, word, and deed and the more readily we will trust Him in all the daily matters of our lives.

John 7 & 8 relates some incidents at the Feast of Booths in Jerusalem that show the mounting opposition to Jesus. It would be about six months after this feast that Jesus was crucified. “After these things” (7:1) reflects a gap of six months from the events in chapter 6, which took place near the time of the Passover (6:4). John fills in the gap by adding (7:1), “Jesus was walking in Galilee, for He was unwilling to walk in Judea because the Jews were seeking to kill Him.”

There were three great Jewish feasts in Jerusalem that every male was expected to be at: Passover (in the spring); Pentecost (50 days after Passover); and Booths (or Tabernacles, in the fall; Lev. 23:33-44; Num. 29). Passover pictures the Lord’s death for our sins as our Passover Lamb. Pentecost foreshadowed the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2). Booths pictures Christ’s coming again to joyously gather the harvest of His people and dwell permanently with them. Colin Kruse explains the Feast of Booths (John [IVP Academic], p. 181):

The feast had a double purpose: to remember Israel’s time in the wilderness when they lived in booths, and to rejoice before the Lord after harvest (in particular the grape, olive and fruit harvests). It also involved looking forward to a new exodus, the time when the kingdom of God would be brought in with all its attendant blessings.

He adds that it was the most joyful of the three pilgrim feasts. In Jesus’ time it included pouring out water as a remembrance of the water from the rock that sustained Israel in the wilderness, and a candle-lighting ceremony that commemorated God’s presence with Israel through the pillar of cloud and fire. Jesus plays off these two ceremonies when He invites those who are thirsty to come to Him and drink (7:37), and when He proclaims (8:12), “I am the Light of the world.”

On one level, John 7:1-13 functions to set the stage for the rest of chapters 7 & 8. But it also reveals to us some wrong views about Jesus that the Jewish people, including Jesus’ own brothers,
had about Him. But a careful look at these verses also reveals that Jesus is both Messiah and Lord, which fits in with John’s purpose that we would believe in Him as the Christ, the Son of God, so that we may have eternal life in His name (20:31). So the main point is: 

Believing in Jesus for salvation depends on having the right view about who He is.

The dominant focus of these verses is on those with wrong views about Jesus.

1. Many have wrong views about Jesus: He is a mere man, whether good or misguided.

   There are three groups pictured here, all of which to one degree or another have wrong views of Jesus: His brothers, the Jewish leaders, and the multitude at the feast.

   A. Jesus brothers had a worldly, unbelieving view of Him: “He needs to go public where it really counts.”

   The reference to Jesus’ brothers (7:3) refers to other sons that Mary and Joseph had after the birth of Jesus (Matt. 1:25, “until”; Luke 2:7, “firstborn”; Mark 3:31-35; 6:3). The Catholic Church believes that Mary was a perpetual virgin, but the biblical evidence is against that view. These brothers were Jesus’ half-brothers, born to Joseph and Mary after Jesus’ birth.

   Although they were unbelieving at this point, we know that at least two of the brothers, James and Jude, later came to believe in Jesus. He appeared to James after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7). James later became the leader of the Jerusalem church and wrote the Epistle of James. Jude, who humbly identifies himself (Jude 1) as “a bond-servant [slave] of Jesus Christ and brother of James,” wrote the short Epistle of Jude.

   In 7:3-4, Jesus’ brothers offer Him some unsolicited “career” advice: “Leave here and go into Judea, so that your disciples also may see Your works which You are doing. For no one does anything in secret when he himself seeks to be known publicly. If you do these things, show Yourself to the world.” John explains (7:5), “For not even His brothers were believing in Him.”

   We cannot say for sure what motives lay behind the brothers’ comments. Some say that they were sarcastically ridiculing Jesus:
“You want to be famous. Go to Jerusalem, do some miracles, and you’ll hit the big time!” Or, they could have been motivated by family shame: Jesus, at first popular, was now losing disciples. If He went up to Jerusalem for this big feast, perhaps He could gain back some of them and save the family name. Or, at best, they were offering sincere, but worldly advice: “If you want Your Messianic claims to be made known, You need to go prove Yourself to the religious authorities in the capital city.”

My understanding is that probably the brothers thought of Jesus in line with the multitude, that He should be a political Messiah who could deliver Israel from Rome. If Jesus’ miracles meant that He was this promised political savior, then He needed to establish His claim in Jerusalem with the Jewish authorities and with the masses there, not in the obscure villages in Galilee. They may have been embarrassed over Jesus’ strange claims that people had to eat His flesh and drink His blood to have eternal life. But, since He was their brother, they didn’t turn away as the offended disciples had done. Rather, they gave Him their opinion of how He could best establish His claims if they were true. But their advice was based on a complete misunderstanding of Jesus’ divine origin and His mission.

The brothers’ advice to Jesus was similar to the temptation that Satan put before Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the temple and let the angels carry Him safely to the ground so that everyone who saw it would be astonished and bow before Him as the Son of God (Matt. 4:5-7; Luke 4:5-8). The brothers here are saying, “Go up to Jerusalem and do a few more spectacular miracles and everyone will follow You.” It was a worldly-wise publicity and marketing strategy, but it was satanic at its core.

There are plenty of people today who try to build their ministries or churches through worldly methods of publicity and marketing. A few years ago, I was making a hospital visit and a woman who was visiting the same patient introduced herself to me and added, “I’m the pastor of marketing at [such and such] Church.” It was the first time I had ever heard about, much less met, a “pastor of marketing”! While there’s nothing wrong with letting the community know that your church exists and when its services are, the whole concept of using worldly marketing methods to promote a
church strikes me as wrong-headed. If the Holy Spirit is moving in our midst, the world will hear about it!

Jesus replied to His brothers (7:6), “My time is not yet here, but your time is always opportune.” I’ll comment on 7:7, where Jesus mentions the world’s hatred, in a moment. But then He tells His brothers (7:8), “Go up to the feast yourselves; I do not go up to this feast because My time has not yet fully come.” So He stayed in Galilee, but after His brothers left for the feast, Jesus went up, “not publicly, but as if, in secret” (7:10).

Note first that Jesus obviously was not lying to His brothers. Some early manuscripts, to alleviate the difficulty of Jesus saying that He wasn’t going, but then He went, report Jesus as saying, “I do not yet go up to this feast,” rather than “I do not go.” But even if the original was, “I do not go,” the context (7:6) makes it clear that He meant, “I am not going with you because it is not the Father’s time for Me to go. You can go any time, but I must go at the time and in the manner that My Father directs Me to go.” So John is showing Jesus’ firm resolve to do the Father’s will, not the will of His unbelieving brothers, even if they meant well.

Also, don’t miss the sober truth that it’s possible to be in close proximity to Jesus, to know Him as few others do, and yet still be unbelieving and lost! Jesus’ brothers had grown up with Him. I can’t imagine what it would have been like to have a sinless brother, but they must have sensed that Jesus was very different than they were. Probably they resented His sinless life because it convicted them of their own sins. They had undoubtedly heard His teaching and they knew that He performed many miracles (“if” in 7:4 does not express doubt, but has the nuance of “since”), but they still did not believe. The application is: You can grow up in a Christian home and go to church every week and know a lot about Jesus, but not personally believe in Him as your Savior and Lord.

B. The Jewish leaders had a hostile view of Jesus: “This man is upsetting our traditions: We need to kill Him!”

By “the Jews” (7:1, 11, 13), John means, “the Jewish leaders.” They were seeking Jesus, but not so they could learn from Him and believe in Him, but so they could kill Him (7:1, 19, 25, 30, 32, 44; 8:37, 40, 59). Jesus threatened their power, which they used to con-
trol the people through fear (7:13). He didn’t fit their idea of a political Messiah who would play their political game and reward them all with nice positions in His kingdom. When He upset the money-changers’ tables in the temple (2:14-16), He threatened their income. So they didn’t carefully listen to Jesus’ teaching or think rationally about the amazing miracles that He was doing. Rather, they reacted emotionally because Jesus threatened their comfortable way of life.

Even so, there are many today who do not believe in Christ because they react emotionally rather than rationally. They sense that to come to Christ would mean the end of their plans, their prestige, and their control over their lives. They like the comfortable lives that they have and they don’t want to face the truth that they are rebels against the Holy One of God.

C. The multitude had an inadequate, mixed view of Jesus: “He’s a good man”; “No, He’s leading the people astray.”

John 7:12-13: “There was much grumbling among the crowds concerning Him; some were saying, ‘He is a good man’; others were saying, ‘No, on the contrary, He leads the people astray.’ Yet no one was speaking openly of Him for fear of the Jews.” “Grumbling” here means “quietly debating among themselves,” since as John notes (7:13), they were afraid to speak openly. “Big brother” (or the National Security Agency) might be listening!

The multitudes were divided into two camps, both of which were wrong. Some said, “He is a good man.” That was true as far as it went, but it didn’t go anywhere near as far as it should, as John’s Gospel demonstrates. John Stott points out (Basic Christianity [Eerdmans], rev. ed., pp. 23-26) that if Jesus was not God in human flesh, His claims would have meant that He was not a good man, but a very self-centered man. He was always talking about Himself and telling people that they should believe in Him as the only way to have eternal life. He claimed that the Old Testament was written about Him (5:39, 46). He claimed to be the bread of life, who could satisfy the hunger of all who come to Him (6:35). He claimed that whoever believes in Him would have rivers of living water flowing from his innermost being (7:38). He claimed to be the Light of the world (8:12). He claimed that before Abraham was born, He existed (8:58). No good man, who was not God in
human flesh, could say such things without being considered a deluded megalomaniac.

The other camp thought that Jesus was leading the people astray. They were the traditionalists, who thought that the ways of the fathers were good enough. But if Jesus was a deceiver, He was a very good one! He got many fiercely monotheistic Jews to believe His claims to be God to the extent that many of them eventually suffered persecution and martyrdom because of their belief in Him. But He also would have been a very evil deceiver, because if He deliberately led people to believe in Him, knowing all the time that He was not the true way to eternal life, He condemned them to a godless eternity. Nothing could be worse than knowingly to deceive people with regard to their eternal destiny.

So both camps were in error and both errors would result in people still being under God’s righteous judgment, because neither camp believed in Jesus as Savior and Lord. But why did these Jewish people, who had the Scriptures, who heard Jesus’ claims and who saw His miracles, not believe?

2. The cause for wrong views about Jesus: He confronts our sin and we fear what others would think if we were to believe in Him.

John gives us two reasons why these Jews at the feast did not believe. First, they hated Jesus because He confronted their sins (7:7). Second, they were ambivalent about Jesus because they feared the religious leaders, who would put them out of the synagogue if they believed (7:13; 9:22).

Jesus tells His brothers (7:7), “The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil.” As we saw (3:20), “For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.” To come to Jesus, you have to let Him confront your sins. You have to turn from your deeds of darkness and learn to walk in the light, as He Himself is in the light (1 John 1:5-7).

Also, implicit in Jesus’ words is the truth that if you follow Him, the world will hate you because of your holy life. You will not be the most popular person at the office or at school if you don’t join the world in its sinful ways. James (one of Jesus’ brothers who
later believed) draws the line (James 4:4): “You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” You have to choose sides. Which side are you on?

Coupled with wanting to blend in with the world is the fear of what people will think if you follow Jesus. It was the fear of the Jewish leaders that kept many in the multitude from openly believing in Jesus (7:13). So if you want to cover up your sins and blend in with the world, you will not truly believe in Jesus.

3. The only saving view of Jesus is that He is both Messiah and Lord.

This is not stated directly in our text, but it comes through pretty clearly:

A. Jesus is Messiah.

We see this by the fact that Jesus did not “do His own thing,” but rather He lived in obedience to the Father’s plan. If Jesus had chosen to do so, He could have been the popular, political Messiah that the people wanted. They wanted to make Him king (6:15). He could have gone up to Jerusalem, much like political candidates today do, worked out a few backroom compromises and given some promises for political favors, and He would have been swept into office.

But Jesus was operating on God’s timetable, which ultimately led to the cross. Here, Jesus tells His brothers (7:6), “My time is not yet here.” He was probably referring to His time to go up to the feast, as well as to the manner in which He would go there, not openly, but at first in a quiet, undramatic way. He knew that He had come to die for our sins, but at the proper time, not in response to His brothers’ worldly advice. He came to lay down His life for His sheep in obedience to the Father’s will.

B. Jesus is Lord.

Jesus testified to the world that its deeds are evil (7:7). Of course, many of God’s prophets down through the centuries had done the same thing. But those prophets always identified them-
selves with the sins that they preached against. Their message was always, “We have sinned against the Lord!”

But Jesus came as the Light shining in the darkness. He could ask (John 8:46), “Which of you convicts Me of sin?” As Peter testified (6:69), Jesus is “the Holy One of God.” Jesus rightly could call on all people to follow Him with the promise that He could give them eternal life. As the officers who were sent to arrest Jesus, but came back without Him, testified (7:46), “Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks.” Jesus is the Lord God in human flesh. To be saved, you must believe that Jesus is the Christ (the promised Savior), and that He is the eternal Son of God.

Conclusion

To sum up, there are several important applications that we should take away from these verses:

First, if you grew up in the church and have been familiar with Christian teaching all your life, do not be fooled into thinking that you are saved by your familiarity with Jesus. If Jesus’ own brothers were not saved by their connection, it shows that no one is saved by familiarity alone. You must personally believe in Him as your Savior from sin, the one who bore your penalty on the cross.

Second, if you have believed in Christ, you must let Him confront your sin so that you forsake it and walk in the light. Through God’s Word, Jesus tells us how to think, speak, and act in a godly way. If you are not letting the Word confront your sins, you are not walking with Jesus.

Finally, if you believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord, you must be at war with the world. You are either a friend of the world and an enemy of God or a friend of God and an enemy of the world. As John wrote (1 John 2:15), “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”
Application Questions

1. To what extent (if any) should the church utilize worldly business and marketing practices? Where do we draw the line?

2. Someone tells you, “I believe that Jesus was a very good man, but I don’t believe He is God.” How would you reply?

3. Agree/disagree: If you are not letting the Word confront your sins, you are not walking with Jesus. What Scriptures support this?

4. What does it look like in daily practice to be at war with the world? Discuss the practical implications of 1 John 2:15-17.

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