

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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JESUS: THE GREAT I AM

John 8:48-59

Some people make really extraordinary claims, don't they? A few weeks ago, one of your pastors – he'll go unnamed – proudly announced that his team would have an undefeated season and was sure to win the Super Bowl. New England didn't win and my prediction proved untrue.

In the present political campaign, everyone who is running gets introduced as “the next president of the United States.” Have you noticed that? Maybe it will be Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton. Maybe John McCain. But only one will be elected. The others' claims are false.

Some people make claims that really get our attention. Not long after he was elected, President John F. Kennedy made the remarkable prediction that America would put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. At the time, Russia was winning the space race and we hadn't even put a man in orbit. But that extraordinary declaration caught the attention of the scientific community and in July 1969, Neil Armstrong took a giant leap for mankind and walked on the moon.

You see, remarkable, extraordinary claims get our attention. When they are true, they shape and turn the way we think and change the landscape of our lives. Of all the extraordinary claims ever made, none were as shocking or as revolutionary as the claims made by Jesus Christ.

He claimed to have divine authority – the power to cast out demons, to perform miracles, even to forgive sins. Jesus said about Himself:

“I am the Bread of Life, he who comes to me will never go hungry.”

“I am the Light of the World, whoever follows me will never walk in darkness.”

“I am the Resurrection and the Life, he who believes in me will never die.”

I am sure you'll agree that these are extravagant, outrageous claims. They scream out for our attention.

In the next few weeks, as we think about the death and resurrection of our Lord, we'll examine some of these claims, the “I Am” sayings of Jesus. We'll explore what He meant by them and what difference it makes in our lives. My hope is that these messages will help us to worship Him and tell others about Him.

Today, we'll deal with the most extraordinary and most important claim that Jesus made – the assertion that He was God Himself.

JESUS' DIFFICULT CONVERSATION WITH THE PHARISEES

In John 8, we see Jesus at the end of a long and difficult conversation with Jewish leaders. Throughout His ministry, there has been an indifference to Jesus' teaching that grew into a mounting hostility – at least among the religious elite. They have reacted to the Lord's words with unbelief and because of this response, Jesus rebukes them for their hardness of heart. And here in our passage, the dialogue between Jesus and these Pharisees has become so frantic that they are downright angry and ready to kill.

Oh, how tragic that the Pharisees would reject Jesus! Today, the term Pharisee has a negative meaning, but in 1st-century Palestine, they were ones who got respect. They were well educated, the religious leadership, guardians of tradition, deeply committed to keeping the Law of God. They considered themselves the true children of Abraham.

But their so-called righteousness was nothing more than deception. Their opposition to Jesus was consistent with the rebellion of Israel throughout biblical history. Over and over again, Israel rejected God's Law, challenged the leaders and prophets God sent and failed to live in obedience to their Lord. Now the Son of God appears in the flesh and they oppose Him.

Throughout this confrontation, the Pharisees try, with no success, to entrap Jesus in His words. They call Jesus names and the Lord rightly accuses them of being children of the devil. Back and forth, with rising intensity, they argue. Here, Jesus is not the quiet and soft-spoken Savior we usually think of. He's tough and hard-hitting. Out of love and concern for their eternal destiny, He exhorts the Pharisees for their arrogance. But they counter His rebuke with insult.

These religious experts called Jesus a demon-possessed Samaritan. It may not sound like it, but that was a real offense. They are saying that Jesus is not a full-blooded Jew, but a crazy half-breed. One of those folks who devout Jews carefully avoid. You see, Samaritans were Israelites who mixed it up with pagans and abandoned the worship of God at the Temple in Jerusalem. So they were seen as traitors to the faith of Israel. And we know that no Samaritan could be the Jewish Savior, no demon-possessed traitor could be the Messiah! That was the insult.

JESUS' RESPONSES TO THE PHARISEES

But notice how Jesus responds. He simply denies that He has a demon and commits His reputation to His Father. "I don't have a demon," He says, "I honor my Father. I am not seeking glory for myself."

This is a tremendous statement. Jesus says to the Pharisees, you dishonor Me, but I'm not here to be honored by you. If I wanted honor and glory, I would have stayed where I was in heaven. You know, Jesus had glory with the Father even before the world was created. The opening words to John's gospel are "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God."

The Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, existed from all eternity! If He was interested in His own glory He would have stayed where He was.

Instead, He steps down from heaven and becomes a man.

Jesus didn't come to receive glory for Himself. He came down to serve and to suffer humiliation and abuse for the sake of those He would save. He came to be spit on, mocked and killed. He came to love sinners, to expose our sin and then to bear our sin and to die our death.

But He says this in verse 50, though I do not seek My glory, “there is one who seeks it, and He is the judge.” What He means is that there is One who is behind Him securing His reputation and honor, and as Jesus submits to the plan of the Father, He will be glorified. And you remember, according to Philippians chapter 2 that’s just what happened:

Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.

That’s how Jesus is glorified. Because He went to the Cross! It is on Calvary’s hill where we most see the love and majesty and power of God.

And, we see the beautiful relationship Jesus had with His Father. Christ doesn't need our honor, but you and I need to honor Christ. Because if we don't, the consequences are horrible! God will judge.

That was what was going on with the Pharisees. They did not honor the Son, so they couldn’t honor the Father. They sought their own glory. They were trapped and didn’t realize it. They honored themselves and you know, their self honor was really self righteousness.

The Pharisees were self righteous people, blind to their sin and its power to capture and enslave, so that even when Jesus pointed out their problem (as we read in verse 35), they could not see it.

Jesus pushes the point with them – He says that sin makes people slaves, not only because of the unrighteous things we do and say, but through our attitudes, our hearts of rebellion and self-sufficiency, our self-glorification.

That’s why in verse 44 Jesus calls them children of the devil. To hunger after one’s own honor, to pridefully demand our own reputation and great name, over and above God’s glory, is of the devil. Seeking glory is just what Satan did when he rebelled against God, destroyed Adam and Eve and tempted the Lord. The glory-seeking Pharisees, in their indifference or in their anger, were of the devil.

What about us? Do we fall into the trap of the Pharisees? Do we clamor after praise and admiration from other people, so that what we do, what we say, is just to look good in the eyes of people, rather than bringing glory to God? We do, don’t we? We act one way in front of those people we want to impress and another way in private, before the Lord.

That’s the problem of sin. For all of us here that is a constant struggle! The crisis of self-glorification, has overtaken all humanity. Every one of us is ensnared in this sin.

But Jesus says there is a way of escape. He says “if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” Those who trust in Him, those who put their absolute faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ, instead of their own self-righteousness, will escape judgment and not see death.

Of course, Jesus is not referring to physical death. Even Christians die. Those who trust fully in Christ’s work on the Cross will experience the first death. Jesus is referring to the second death, eternal condemnation in Hell.

When you and I put our faith in Jesus Christ and nothing else – not our good works, not baptism, not our church membership, nothing that will bring us personal honor and glory – but we come to the Father needy and empty-handed, asking for forgiveness, then, and only then, will He set us free, and keep us from death, and bring us into glory with His Son.

But, you see, the Pharisees didn’t get it. These guys think they’ve ambushed Jesus but they were really caught up in their own trap. You can hear them say: “Aha! Even Abraham died, Jesus. Do you think you can cheat death? That you can give others the ability to cheat death? Now we know for sure that you are demon-possessed. You are delusional, out of your mind. Who do you think you are?”

JESUS’ EXTRAORDINARY CLAIM

That’s the important question, isn’t it? That’s the question the Pharisees faced. It’s the question we face. Who is Jesus? In verse 58, Jesus says: “Before Abraham was, I AM. Before Abraham was born, I existed.”

These remarkable words declare the eternal preexistence of Christ. That’s what the apostles believed and that’s what we are to believe. Paul reminds us in Colossians that Jesus is the “image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.” The writer to Hebrews says the Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word.” Jesus was claiming to be God!

That’s outrageous! As C.S. Lewis wrote, those are the words of a liar or lunatic, so nutty he thinks he is a poached egg.

Or they are true!!

Now, the phrase I AM is the same as in the book of Exodus when God reveals Himself to Moses in the burning bush. I AM is the Hebrew word Yahweh or Jehovah, translated in most of our modern English translations with the all-capitalized “LORD.” It is the name God used when He first revealed Himself as the One who would rescue Israel from bondage in Egypt. Jesus was claiming to be the Savior of Israel, the God of Abraham.

That’s the same idea expressed many years later by the prophet Isaiah: “I AM the LORD, your Holy One, Israel’s Creator, your King, I AM the LORD your God, who upholds your right hand. I AM He who blots out your transgressions and remembers your sins no more.” I AM the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me.

This is it, this is everything that was promised to Israel and to us. Everything in history is being unfolded providentially so that the promise of redemption may be fulfilled through the Son. When you pick up your Bible and read from the Old Testament to the New, that is what it is about – getting to the point where we are now in John 8 – the Great I Am is here, Yahweh has come.

You see, the LORD has broken into time and into history to redeem a people for Himself. The great I AM has come in humility to bear the sin for us His people and to die the death that we deserve. The Son, the great I AM, has come not to seek His own glory, not to be served, but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many.

THE RESPONSE TO JESUS' CLAIM

But the Pharisees can't see this. They are trapped in their own self-righteousness, their own self-glorification. Their indifference, their hardness of heart, their unbelief kept them from knowing who Jesus really was. They do not honor Him as God and as their self-righteousness pushes indifference into rebellion (as it always does), they pick up stones to kill Him.

Jesus calls them to look beyond their self-sufficiency, but they cannot believe. He calls them to follow Him, but they will not. Even though the Redeemer of Israel is standing right in front of them, they will not see. They will not embrace the gospel and escape spiritual death.

Well friends, we face the same choice. Jesus calls us to avoid the trap of the Pharisees and to see who He really is. He calls us to follow Him because of who He is and because of what He has done for us. But sometimes our indifference to Jesus' claims sneak up on us. Sometimes we don't even realize the problem of the Pharisees may be our own.

A. W. Tozer once observed that Christians treat Jesus in much the same way the British treat their monarchs. The kings and queens of Britain are called the rulers of the nation. But they do not actually rule, they only reign. They do not have any power; they are mere figureheads before whom people bow and address as "Your Majesty." They take up a lot of attention, but the British people do not allow these kings and queens to have any practical power in their lives.

This is the kind of indifference we often have toward Jesus. As Ray Stedman writes:

When we acknowledge Him King of our life He is not to be a mere figurehead but One who has the right to rule, the right to control all of our affairs. When we see Him claiming to be the One who honors the Father by the way He lives, the One who removes the sting of death from those who follow Him, the One who is the Intimate of God and the Object of all His plans and purposes for all ages of time, and finally the One who is Himself above time as the Eternal One breaking into time whenever He chooses, there is only one choice to make. Either we worship Him or we ignore Him.

You see, we need to escape the trap of the Pharisees. Just like the mounting hostility of the Pharisees, if we don't do something about it, our indifference will turn into angry rebellion. We need to confess our self-glorification, run from our indifference and hardness of heart, go to the Lord and ask for help to shed our tendency to ignore Jesus. We must acknowledge Him for who He really is. The great I AM.

Folks, either Jesus is who He says He is, or He is not.

Either we believe in Him or we don't!

Either we follow Him or we walk away enslaved by our sin.

Jesus is trustworthy and worthy of our obedience or He is not worthy of anything at all.

He is the great I AM. He calls us away from self-righteousness and indifference. He calls us to follow Him.

Want to avoid the trap of the Pharisees? Want to avoid the problem of self-glorification? Get to know Jesus for who He really is. The great I AM!