

# FATHER AND SON

John 5:19-24

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“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (Jn. 5:24).

I had been in the United States Army for six years when it first occurred to me to wonder why I had joined. It was not that I was unhappy, but just that I could not remember thinking it through.

When I reflected on the matter, it was not hard to figure out. It was because of my father, who as a career soldier had spent thirty years in uniform. Despite the patriotic reasoning and the many satisfactions of military service, it was really because of him that I was a soldier. It had been one of the best days of my life when my father pinned on my shoulders the same gold lieutenants bars that his father had pinned on his. When on leave, I used to sit and talk with my dad about tank gunnery and armor tactics – since he was a tank officer, I was too – or about the challenges of command or the fun of tricking the supply corps into actually issuing supplies.

My situation was hardly unique. It is knit into the fabric of life that children delight to connect with their fathers. Jesus was no different in this, except that he claimed that his Father is God. This outraged the Jewish leaders. They were already upset with Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, but, John says, they now sought to kill him, “because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (Jn. 5:18).

In what remains of John 5 we have a unique portion of God’s Word, in which Jesus formally defends his divine Sonship. Many scholars have thought that Jesus delivered this address before the assembled

Sanhedrin, both because of its formal structure and because John presents this material as an answer to a legal charge. J. C. Ryle states, “Nowhere else in the Gospels do we find our Lord making such a formal, systematic, orderly, regular statement of His own unity with the Father, His Divine commission and authority, and the proofs of His Messiahship, as we find it this discourse. To me it seems one of the deepest things in the Bible.”<sup>1</sup>

## LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

Jesus had explained his healing on the Sabbath by saying, “My Father is working until now, and I am working” (Jn. 5:17). The Pharisees understood that he was referring to God – who had made the Sabbath – and was calling God his Father. Under normal circumstances, they had every reason to be appalled. The watchword of Judaism was found in Deuteronomy 6:4, the famous *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” Therefore, for anyone to claim deity for himself was to commit the highest blasphemy.

Jesus explains that his claim to divine Sonship does not threaten the oneness of God because of his unity with the Father: “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing” (Jn. 5:19). This is why Jesus was not sinning by healing on the Sabbath, since after resting from creation on the seventh day God continues his work of redemption, and since Jesus’ work is one with God’s. What the Old Testament alluded to only in shadowy form – the doctrine of the Trinity – Jesus declared in the full light of day. This is the teaching that the one God exists in three Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Focusing here on his relationship as Son to the Father, Jesus states that in all that they do, they are always working together. The divine Persons of the Father and the Son, together with the Spirit, are one God both in essence and in activity.

There may be no other passage that delves so deeply into the inner relationship between the heavenly Father and Son. Jesus’ remarks are well organized. He works out the unity of his relationship with the Father with four statements, each of which begins with the word

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<sup>1</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 1:145.

“for.” The first two outline his relationship with the Father, beginning in verse 19: “For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.” There is unity between the Father and Son because of the Son’s perfect obedience to the Father.

The Son, though co-eternal and co-divine, is functionally subordinate to the Father. This is why Jesus could say that he delighted to do God’s will. The Son wills only what the Father wills. This is encouraging to us, since it assures us that there is no divided purpose within the Godhead. God the Father does not reject Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for our sins, since Jesus’ atoning work was the Father’s will. If Christ’s will was not in union with the Father, then the Jews would have been right to accuse him of acting as a rival to God. But Jesus insists that his will and the Father’s are in perfect accord.

Some theologians have argued that Jesus was admitting some defect or personal inferiority to the Father when he said, “The Son can do nothing of his accord.” But this is rendered impossible when we consider what Jesus then says: “For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise” (Jn. 5:19). If Jesus does “whatever” the Father does, then his unity with the Father must involve equal ability. Alfred Barnes comments, “If the Son does all that the Father does, then, like Him, He must be almighty, omniscient, all-present, and infinite in every perfection; or, in other words, He must be God.”<sup>2</sup>

In his second “for” statement, Jesus expands on this wonderful relationship between Father and Son: “For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing” (Jn. 5:20). Here we enter into the heart of the Father-Son relationship. The unity between Father and Son consists of their constant, loving communion.

It seems that Jesus is picturing his relationship with the Father in terms of an apprenticeship. Just as our Lord would have learned carpentry in the shop of his adopted father, Joseph – with Joseph entering young Jesus into his work, passing on the secrets of the trade, and honing his skills with careful attention – so God the Son learns “all that the Father is doing” through their working fellowship. C. H. Dodd describes how a son learns his craft: “He watches his father at work, and performs each operation as his father performs it.

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Ryle, I:286.

The affectionate father shows the boy all the secrets of his craft.”<sup>3</sup>  
The Father shows all to the Son because he loves him. If a stranger came into your office and demanded that you present your business secrets, you would show him the door. But when a father is grooming his son to carry on his work, he opens all the files and shows him the entire business. Not that there is any ignorance or actual immaturity in God the Son – he has been eternally the almighty and all-competent Son – but rather the nature of his relationship with the Father.

One of our goals as parents is to bond with our children through our involvement with them and our training. It is not enough for us to discipline our children; we must also disciple them. Parents – especially fathers – should play with their children and allow the children to help them to do work. Not only do our children grow and learn things they will need as adults, but we gain loving communion with them. Daughters gain confidence in their femininity through the attention and approval of their fathers, and sons gain a sense of purpose through the values and ideals their fathers etch upon their hearts. The perfect model for this is the communion within the Godhead. Jesus, having just begun his ministry, added that the Father’s investment in him was hardly over: “And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel” (Jn. 5:20).

Realizing this should have two effects on us. First, it should increase our awe towards Jesus Christ. His constant experience is one of loving communion with God the Father, as the Father “shows him” his wise, holy, and glorious plans and as the Son reveals the Father to us through his glorious works. One of our Christmas carols says, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate deity.” Joining our hearts with angel voices, we should thus sing, “Glory to the newborn king!”<sup>4</sup>

Second, this ought to give us similar awe at the privileges we gain by our union with Christ through faith. John has said that those who receive Jesus are granted “the right to become children of God” (Jn. 1:12). While we will never share Christ’s deity, we nonetheless enter

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<sup>3</sup> C.H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1963), 386, n. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Wesley, *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing*, 1739.

through him into a relationship of loving communion with the Father. Many of us never had fathers who took time to share their hearts or to take interest in our growth. But our heavenly Father disciplines us in his wisdom and work through his Word. And he will spend eternity showing us what he is about and nurturing our capacity to share in his glory. This is what our present lives should increasingly involve: through God's Word, understanding and entering into God's glorious work, revealing the Father to the world just as the Son has revealed him to us.

## THE SON GIVES LIFE

The first two explanations that Jesus gave of his unity with God, each beginning with the word "for", dealt with the nature of their relationship. The last two deal with powers and prerogatives exercised by the Son in accordance with the Father's will. Jesus continues, "For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will" (Jn. 5:21). This is another reason why Jesus' claim to deity was not blasphemous, because his union with the Father is proved by his power to give life.

The rabbis had a saying: "Three keys are in the hand of God and they are not given into the hand of any agent, namely that of rain, that of the womb, and that of the raising of the dead."<sup>5</sup> Only God can give life or raise the dead. Once, when a Syrian king sent a letter asking for his servant, Naaman, to be healed of leprosy, Israel's king cried, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive?" (2 Ki. 5:7). But Jesus does not hesitate to claim this power for himself, proving his claim to deity.

This is an explanation for his healing of the invalid by the pool. Healing is a facet of Christ's life-giving power, and the miracle they had encountered showed the truth of Jesus' claim. Both Elijah and Elisha had succeeded in raising the dead through their prayers (1 Ki. 17:17-24; 2 Ki. 4:32-36), but Jesus excels even these great prophets, raising the dead by his own will. Like the Father, Jesus is sovereign bestowing salvation: he "gives life to whom he will" (Jn. 5:21).

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<sup>5</sup> Cited from Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 182.

The last miracle John records is the raising of Jesus' friend Lazarus after he had lain in the tomb for four days. By raising Lazarus with his bare word in a village just outside Jerusalem, Jesus was publicly declaring his deity just prior to taking up the cross. Jesus stood before the tomb, already smelling with death, and "cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out.' The man who had died came out" (Jn. 11:43-44). Jesus explained, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (Jn. 11:25-26).

But Jesus does not merely grant life to those who are physically dead; he also gives life to those who are spiritually dead. Leon Morris writes, "Just as the Father takes dead bodies and raises them to new life, so the Son takes people who, though their bodies are alive, are yet in a state of death, and raises them to spiritual life."<sup>6</sup>

This is the miracle Jesus is doing today even in our midst, wherever his gospel is faithfully witnessed and lived. Kent Hughes writes of the change in his own life when he heard the gospel, believed, and received new life from God's Son. He tells of lying awake the night he was born again, devouring his Bible under a flashlight. "That little Bible had suddenly come alive for me!" he remembers. "I felt free, my sins were gone, and I had purpose in life... Christ had given me life."<sup>7</sup> Despite our individual differences, this is an experience to which every Christian can relate: "the Son gives life!" (Jn. 5:21). Many of can remember clearly the specific time when spiritual life came into our souls, and all of us should be continually experiencing new life as we grow through the Word, through prayer, and through our daily walk with God.

## THE SON IS GIVEN JUDGMENT

**T**hird, Jesus' deity is proved by fact that God has appointed him judge over all. Jesus said, "[For] the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son

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<sup>6</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 279.

<sup>7</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 164-165.

does not honor the Father who sent him” (Jn. 5:22). We may recall that John 3:17 stated that Jesus came “not to condemn the world,” which causes some people to see a contradiction. But the point of that verse was that Jesus came to save a world that was already condemned. It does rule out the truth that God has decreed that final judgment will take place before a throne on which his crucified and risen Son is seated as Judge. Revelation 20:12 shows the books of our lives being opened before the great white throne, with everyone judged “by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.” It also shows the “Book of Life,” in which are written the names of all those who belong to Christ through faith, whose sins are forgiven through his blood and who are granted entry into God’s eternal reign of glory.

In our study of the next passage we will focus on the Bible’s teaching about the final judgment and Christ’s role in it. Jesus’ point here was to defend himself from the Pharisees’ accusation. His claims to be God’s Son were not blasphemous because God the Father desires to be worshiped through the worship of his only Son. Jesus states the Father has appointed him as Judge, “that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him” (Jn. 5:23).

This is why it is essential that we believe on God’s Son, Jesus Christ. John concludes his Gospel by saying, “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn. 20:31). This explains why Christians insist that people must believe in our Savior if they want to be saved: not because we have a sense of religious superiority, but because God has stated that he is dishonored unless his Son is honored in faith.

It has become acceptable today for preachers to suggest that people who deny Christ might be saved out of the sincerity of their religious views or their moral piety. But God himself rejects such an idea and such falsely humble preaching. Knowing this, we must lovingly, prayerfully, and earnestly say to our Jewish friends, our humanist friends, our liberal Protestant friends, and many others that without honoring Christ they are dishonoring God the Father. J. C. Ryle accurately summarizes: “Whenever therefore any one through

ignorance, or pride, or unbelief, neglects Christ, but professes at the same time to honour God, he is committing a mighty error, and so far from pleasing God, is greatly displeasing Him.”<sup>8</sup> Surely any faith, by whatever name it is called, that refuses God’s Son will fail to save those who have thus dishonored God himself.

## FAITH IN GOD’S SON RECEIVES ETERNAL LIFE

**I**magine what it must have been like to receive this teaching directly from the lips of God’s Son, as the Pharisees and other religious leaders did. No doubt most were enraged, and we know from John that most of them wanted to kill him. But how wonderful that it was to them that Jesus offered one of the greatest statements of the gospel in all of Scripture, in which those who hated him the most were invited to receive eternal life through faith in him. Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (Jn. 5:24). This is the argument that ultimately defends him from a charge of blasphemy, because through him the Father offers eternal life to all who believe.

I want to conclude by making some observations about this verse, to ensure that no one here fails to understand the glorious offer that is made to you as well. First, notice that it is through Christ’s word – that is, through his gospel – that we truly believe in God: “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me.” This is why the church must preach and Christians must witness the gospel and not worldly substitutes; Paul insisted, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). This does not restrict us to the New Testament, since the whole Bible witnesses to Christ. The gospel is found in all the Scriptures, and as Paul declared, “The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). When Jesus revealed himself through the Scriptures to the disciples on the Emmaus Road, they marveled, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Lk. 24:32). We can

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<sup>8</sup> Ryle, 290.

experience that same revival by learning and believing the Word of Christ in the Bible.

Second, notice that faith in Christ marks the great divide between salvation and condemnation. It is not whoever is rich, or whoever is intelligent, or whoever is famous, but “whoever... believes” that has eternal life. Some Christians are afflicted with doubts because they wonder if they are one of God’s elect. But notice that while verse 21 says that “the Son gives life to whom he will,” and that is a statement of divine sovereignty in salvation, verse 24 adds that “whoever believes... has eternal life.” This tells us that God’s elect are those who believe in Jesus Christ; if you believe in Jesus, you are necessarily one of those he chose to make alive.

Therefore, faith in Christ is the most precious possession anyone could have; the matter of believing in Jesus is the most urgent matter in anyone’s life. Ryle reminds us, “We should mark carefully the strong language of Scripture in describing the immense difference between the position of a man who believes, and the man who does not believe. It is nothing else than the difference between life and death.”<sup>9</sup> One may be raised in a Christian home, may be baptized, may be a church member, and may have many good works, but without a saving faith that relies utterly on Christ as he is presented in Scripture, such a person is not saved.

Third, and last, you may have many struggles, but if you have faith in Christ, you have immediate and full possession of nothing less than eternal life: “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (Jn. 5:24). Note the present tense. Jesus does not say that with faith you have made a good start that may end up well, or that your faith must be improved by good works or pilgrimages or the giving of money if you wish to live forever – he says that whoever believes enters immediately into eternal life.

Eternal life is the life that never ends. Ten-year life lasts for ten years. Fifty-year life lasts for fifty years. Eternal life lasts for all eternity. Why should you perish, when you may live forever through faith in God’s Son? But eternal life also has a glorious *quality*. It is

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<sup>9</sup> Ryle, 1:296.

to know yourself free from condemnation before God – despite your sins, Jesus says you “do not come into judgment.” Why? Because faith in Christ is faith in his blood, shed to cleanse all your sins before God. To have eternal life is also to begin an entirely new existence. For a Christian, the life of heaven does not begin at death: it begins immediately upon believing in Jesus.

Earlier, I mentioned Kent Hughes’ conversion. He explains the new life that began: “I entered a new realm. My associations changed. My view of work, my relationships with other people, my relationship with my parents – all of these things entered into a process of transformation by virtue of what had happened in my life. As soon as I received Christ, I qualitatively began to experience eternal life. I know a tiny bit of what heaven is going to be like because of what I experienced then and what I am experiencing now.”<sup>10</sup>

Most wonderfully, to have eternal life through faith in Christ, is to know the Father’s love in a way similar to the love Jesus experiences. And it is the Father’s love that we have longed for all our lives. This is why Jesus came – to bring the Father’s love into a loveless world and to enter us into close communion with our Creator and God, who will show us his glory and enter us into his eternal work. How can this be? Through the Son, whom the Father loves, and whom he gave that through faith in him we might be freed to enjoy the forever life for which we were made.

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<sup>10</sup> Hughes, 165.