THE FATHER AND THE SON

John 5:16–30

Key Verse: 5:24

“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.”

Are you open-minded? We like to say, “Keep an open mind.” But honestly, we’re all not so open-minded because we all have some ideas we’re pretty set on. Our preconceived ideas are like a filter that block things out of our minds. If somebody violates our preconceived ideas, we immediately disagree with and disregard him. Preconceived ideas may not always be bad, but the problem is, they hinder us from opening our minds, learning and growing. We see this in today’s passage. The Jews have some preconceived ideas about the Sabbath and about God that Jesus seems to violate, so they can’t open their hearts to him. Despite this, Jesus humbly explains who he is and what he’s doing. His main theme in these verses is that God is his Father and he is God’s Son. This beautiful Father/Son relationship helps us understand who Jesus is and what he does. What Jesus wants us to hear most is his invitation to cross over from death to life. Today we’re going to think about what that means, and how we can experience it. May God open our hearts and help us hear and believe his word.

Look at verse 16. In Jesus’ time the Jews had developed many restrictions of what they could do on the Sabbath. Their Sabbath rules were so many that they organized them into 39 categories, with major sections, from making bread, to taking care of clothing, to animal skins, to construction. It required great discipline to keep them all. The Jewish leaders saw themselves as the Sabbath police enforcing Sabbath discipline among the people. They thought the stricter they were about the Sabbath, the more they were pleasing God. But when Jesus was healing people on the Sabbath, they saw it as work. Their fixed ideas made them pass judgment on Jesus. It says here that they began to persecute him. How so? The passage doesn’t exactly say. But clearly they labeled Jesus as wrong and were pressuring him to stop. In Greek the word “persecute” here literally means “harass.” Though he was showing compassion and healing, these legalistic people were giving Jesus a hard time and rejecting him.

How does Jesus respond to them? Read verse 17. That’s an amazing statement! Even their best rabbis would agree that God does not stop working on the Sabbath. God keeps giving life and sustaining the world on the Sabbath day. Jesus says he was simply following God’s lead. It’s a powerful statement that God is always at his work to this very day. But what kind of work is he doing? It’s not about keeping rules or only sustaining physical life. God is trying to draw people back to himself. It’s the work of God’s Spirit stirring in people’s hearts and souls. God is constantly looking for ways to reach people who are cut off from him. Jesus says here, “…and I, too, am working.” It tells us that Jesus was in perfect sync with God his Father. Jesus was so close to the Father, carefully doing what he wanted him to do. That’s why he healed that invalid man. But what does it mean to us? It tells us that, like our Lord Jesus, we should never be checked out; we should be alert to how God is working today, right now, and how he may be asking us to help him. We can live that way only when we’re watchful, prayerful, and striving to be close to him. Read verse 17 again.

How do the Jewish leaders respond? Look at verse 18. Clearly they don’t listen to him at all; they get worse. They already wanted to kill Jesus, especially after he had cleared the temple. Now they think they have even more reason to do it—not just for breaking the Sabbath, but for blasphemy. By calling God his own Father they realize that Jesus sees himself as equal with God. Good Jews did their best to honor only God. They thought no one should try to steal God’s glory, that only God should be glorified. It’s so true. But this good idea, taken to an extreme, made them blind to see who Jesus really is.

Jesus knows what they have in their minds about him. But he goes on to explain how his relationship with the Father affects what he’s doing. Read verse 19. Someone who claims to be equal with God may seem to be the most proud. But in fact, what Jesus is saying here is the most humble. He says he can do nothing by himself. So many people think they can do many things with their bright minds, willpower and many abilities. But not Jesus. Jesus was deeply and utterly dependent on his Father God. Jesus would not make a move without knowing if God his Father were leading him to do whatever it was. If God were doing it, no matter how unexpected or radical, Jesus would jump right in and join him. If God were not doing it, no matter how good it might seem, Jesus would stay out. Like our Lord Jesus, we need to strive to become more keenly aware of what God is doing, not just following our own preconceived ideas, and we need to become more genuinely dependent on him.

Jesus goes on to say more about his relationship with God. Read verse 20. What did it mean for Jesus to be in a Father/Son relationship with God? Above all else, it was a love relationship. Jesus was aware that the Father was showing him his work because he loved him. God is not like a workaholic boss constantly demanding productivity from his employees. God is our loving heavenly Father who wants us to know all that he is doing and to work together closely with him. This love relationship was the basis for all the work. Jesus says God would show him even greater, more amazing works he had for him to do.

What were they? Read verses 21,22. God would give his Son his own sovereign power to give life, and his own sovereign power to judge. Only God can give life, and only God can judge, but these are the things God would give his Son Jesus to do. God even refrains from judging, and lets his Son do it. What a mistake it is to persecute Jesus, God’s Son! It’s because Jesus has the power to give life and the power to judge. Why would God give his Son these two amazing works to do? Read verse 23. This is another amazing statement. We cannot honor God without honoring Jesus. If we want to honor God by what we’re doing, we need to learn to honor Jesus first. But how do we truly honor Jesus? People try to do it in many ways, with many good ideas. Some praise Jesus with their words or music. Some even build great cathedrals for Jesus. But the most powerful way to honor someone, I believe, is when we really trust that person. We honor Jesus when we trust him, humbly and completely.

But why is Jesus saying all this? Why is he telling the Jewish leaders about his relationship with God the Father and the amazing works God would give him to do? Read verse 24. Jesus wants to save, not judge. Jesus wants to help people cross over from death to life. Jesus says “whoever.” It could be even some of the Jewish leaders. Jesus makes the way of salvation very simple. What is it? It’s to hear his word and believe that God sent him. Jesus says we’re saved as soon as we hear his word and believe that God sent him. People try to earn their own version of “salvation” in many ways; by education, good deeds, penance, hard work, or keeping religious rules. But God’s salvation is so simple: just hear Jesus’ word and believe that God sent him.

Sounds easy, but it’s really hard for us. Why? It’s because we have a hard time “hearing.” The Greek word “hears” in verse 24 literally means to have ears, to not be deaf, to have the capacity to understand. In the movie *The Miracle Worker*, a teacher tries to help a very spoiled little blind and deaf girl Helen Keller to understand that the words she’s spelling in sign language represent real things and people. It’s a great struggle involving throwing things, spitting, biting and temper tantrums, but Helen finally “hears.” Likewise, we can hear somebody but actually be tuning them out. We have the expression “I hear you.” It means “I get what you’re saying and I accept it.” But we don’t really “hear” a person if we don’t really respect him or her. Whether they’re younger or older than us, from our own culture or a different one, if we don’t really respect them, as soon as they start talking, we tune them out. On the other hand, when we respect someone, we really listen. It’s another way we honor Jesus the Son—we hear him, we listen carefully to what he’s saying. Christianity is all about “hearing” Jesus, listening to his words. Some people think, “Yeah, I heard him a long time ago. I’m fine.” But we need to keep listening. It doesn’t say “heard,” past tense, but “hears,” present tense. This is why we all need to keep paying close attention to what the Bible actually says. If we think we already know, we stop listening.

What happens when we hear his word and believe that God sent him? Jesus says we *have* eternal life and *will not be* judged. He’s talking about two things here, present and future. As we listen to his word, not only do we have a guarantee of eternal life, but also we experience eternal life right now. What does it mean to have eternal life? It’s not just an eternal existence. Jesus says later that eternal life is to come to know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (17:3). We come to have a very real and personal knowledge of God. So many people can know *about* God. They learn information about him. But the eternal life that Jesus says we come to have right now is an intimate fellowship with our Father God, just like the closest fellowship Jesus the Son has with God the Father. To have this eternal life, this closest fellowship with our Father God through Jesus the Son, is the best blessing in the world. What if you have all the power, wealth and glory of this world right now, but don’t have eternal life? What good is it? Young people typically think this offer of eternal life isn’t appealing, because they have their whole lives ahead of them. There are so many other things they think are desirable. But having eternal life right now is life to the full (10:10). We don’t have to work years to achieve it; we can have it right now, if only we really hear Jesus’ word and believe that God sent him.

Jesus also says we won’t be judged. Of course, as long as we live among people we’re going to be judged. People judge us for all kinds of reasons—what we look like, what ethnicity we are, how much money we have, where we live, who we associate with, what school we went to, etc. That kind of judging is so superficial. We also get judged when we try to follow Jesus. Jesus says we’ll be hated the way he was hated (15:18). But the judgment he’s talking about in verse 24 is the final judgment when he comes again. God is going to evaluate each person based on all that we’ve done in our lives (Ro2:5). No one can escape God’s judgment; in fact, the Bible says it begins with the family of God (1Pe4:17). But the judgment Jesus is talking about here means being told that we don’t belong to God, being cast out and sent away from him forever. It’s not just physical death; it’s called “the second death” (Rev21:8).

People who are enjoying life right now may not take Jesus’ words seriously here. They think they’re “all good.” But people who are really suffering, really tasting death in their souls because of all their sins and the sins of others, find his promise so precious, so amazing. Sadly, we human beings really appreciate things only as we get close to death, when we feel entrapped by it, and hopeless, that there’s no way out. Jesus promises that when we hear his word and believe God sent him, we cross over from death to life. It’s like being rescued from the middle of the ocean by a lifeboat, or brought out of the shackles of a dark prison, or delivered from a terrible torture chamber. Spiritually, so many people are in the realm of death without knowing it. Right now their life may seem good to them, but it’s on a trajectory that ends with eternal death and judgment. Everyone really needs to hear Jesus’ word and believe that God sent him. Then, no matter who they are or what they’ve done, they can cross over from death to life.

In verse 25 Jesus says that his voice enables those who are dead to live. He means those who are dead both physically and spiritually. It’s amazing that Jesus’ word has power to give life to the dead, just as his word healed the man who’d been an invalid for 38 years. In verses 26,27 Jesus repeats that the Father has given his Son the power to give life and the power to judge. In verses 28,29 he specifically mentions Judgment Day again. On that day, no one will be able to hide. Like it or not, everyone will receive their just judgment.

Read verse 30. Here Jesus again mentions his total dependence on God: “By myself I can do nothing.” He says that in judging he listens very carefully and closely to the Father. Finally he mentions his own motivation. Jesus is never trying to please himself, but only the Father who sent him. As the Son, he’s sure the Father loves him, and by seeking to please him, he’s showing love for the Father in return. This close love relationship with the Father is what eternal life and serving God is all about.

Today we learned how God the Father and Jesus the Son work together, and how we can, too. We need to get rid of all our preconceived ideas and really learn from Jesus. We especially heard his promise that we can cross over from death to life if only we truly hear his word and believe that God sent him. May God help us to experience this life. May God also help each of us to follow Jesus closely and share his word of life with those who are dying.