

# GOSPEL FOR JUDICA SUNDAY [FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT]

John 8:46-59

*"Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me? Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God." The Jews answered Him, "Are we not right in saying that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?" Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me. Yet I do not seek My own glory; there is One who seeks it, and He is the judge. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word, he will never see death." The Jews said to Him, "Now we know that You have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet You say, 'If anyone keeps My word, he will never taste death.' Are You greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do You make Yourself out to be?" Jesus answered, "If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing. It is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' But you have not known Him. I know Him. If I were to say that I do not know Him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know Him and I keep His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see My day. He saw it and was glad." So the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." So they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.*

1. This Gospel reading teaches how the hardened become more raving, the more they are taught and kindly enticed. Here Christ asks them very kindly for the reason why they still do not believe, since they can find no fault either with His life or with His teaching. His life is innocent, for He defies them and says, "Which one of you can rebuke Me of a sin?" His teaching also [is innocent], for He says, "If I tell the truth, [why do you not believe Me]?" [John 8:46]. So He acts as He teaches.

2. Each preacher should demonstrate these two points. First, [he should demonstrate] an innocent life, so that he can defy [his opponents] and no one has a reason to slander his teaching. Second, [he should demonstrate] irreproachable doctrine, so that he misleads no one who follows him. In this way he would be in the right on both sides: with his good life against his



enemies, who look much more at his life than at his doctrine and despise the doctrine for the sake of the life; and with his doctrine among his friends, who pay much more attention to his doctrine than to his life and will bear with his life for the sake of his doctrine.

3. It is certainly true that no life is so good that it is without sin before God. For that reason it is enough that it be irreproachable before the people. But his doctrine must be so good and pure that it stands not only before people but also before God. Therefore, each godly preacher can indeed say: "Which one of you can find fault with me—among you, I say, who are human? But to God I am a sinner." Moses does that when he boasts that he had never taken anything or wronged anyone (Numbers 16 [:15]). Samuel (1 Samuel 12 [:3]), Jeremiah [Jer. 26:15], and Hezekiah [2 Kgs. 20:1–3; Isa. 38:1–3] also did that when they boasted about their innocence before the people in order to stop the mouths of the slanderers. But Christ does not speak that way about His doctrine. He does not say, "Which one of you can find fault with My doctrine?" Rather, [He says], "If I tell the truth" [John 8:46]. We must be certain that the doctrine is correct before God and is the truth, and accordingly pay no attention to how it is regarded by the people.

4. Thus the Jews have no reason for their unbelief other than that they are not God's children; therefore, He brings down the verdict on them and says: "Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God" [John 8:47]. That is nothing other than [to say], "You are of the devil."

5. The Jews could not tolerate this, for they wanted to be God's children and people; for that reason they now rage away and defame both His life and doctrine. [They defame] His doctrine by saying, "You have a demon" [John 8:48], that is, "You speak from the devil and Your doctrine is the devil's lie." [They defame] His life by saying, "You are a Samaritan" [John 8:48], which sounds worse among the Jews than any other vice.

So Christ teaches us here how things must happen with us and with His Word. Both our life and our doctrine must be condemned and defamed, and this will be done by the most distinguished, wisest, and greatest people on earth. We know the bad trees by their fruits [cf. Matt. 7:15–19] when they, under a good appearance, are so bitter, venomous, impatient, shameless, and mad to condemn and pass sentence, when they are really hit and what they do is rejected by means of God's Word.

6. What does Christ do here? He leaves His life stuck in shame and is silent and tolerates it when they call Him a Samaritan, but He defends His doctrine. The doctrine is not ours but God's, and He does not tolerate anything, for that is where patience ceases. But I ought to risk all I have for it, and suffer all they do, so that the honor of God and of His Word do not suffer.



If I perish, no great harm is done. But if I let God's Word perish and remain silent, then I do harm to God and to the whole world. Although I cannot restrain their mouths nor prevent their slander, nevertheless I ought not keep silent, as I do about my good life, nor let them be in the right, lest they be victorious. Although they do me injustice, yet it remains right before God.

So Christ defends Himself and says, "I do not have a demon" [John 8:49]—that is, My doctrine is not the devil's lies—"but I honor My Father." That is: "In My doctrine I preach the grace of God, through which He is to be praised, loved, and honored by believers. The evangelical preaching office is nothing other than God's glory. Psalm 19 [1] says, 'The heavens declare the glory of God,' etc. But 'you dishonor Me,' that is, you call Me a devilish liar, who disgraces and dishonors God."

7. Why does He not say, "I honor My Father, and you do not honor Him"? Rather, He says, "You dishonor Me" [John 8:49]. In that way He secretly points out that His Father's honor and His honor are one and the same thing, just as He is one God with the Father. Yet at the same time He also wants [to point out] that if our preaching office, which praises God, is justly to be honored, then it must suffer disgrace. We are also to do the same against our princes and priests. When they impugn our life, we should tolerate it and repay them love for hate, good for evil.

But when they attack our doctrine, then God's honor is attacked, and then love and patience should be at an end and we should not keep silent but also say: "I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not care that you dishonor me, for I do not seek my own honor. But watch out! There is one who does investigate and judge it; that is, the Father will require it from you and will judge you and not let you go unpunished. He seeks not only His honor but also my [honor], because I seek His honor, as He says, 'Those who honor Me I will honor' (1 Samuel 2 [30])." Our comfort is that we are happy, even though the whole world disgraces and dishonors us, because we are certain that God promotes our honor, and for that reason He will punish, judge, and take revenge. It will certainly come to anyone who believes and waits for it.

*Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My Word, he will never see death. [John 8:51]*

8. Here He completely spoils it, because He not only defends His doctrine, which they attribute to the devil, as right and good but also ascribes such power to it that it becomes a queen over the devil, death, and sin, with the power to give and preserve eternal life. Look at how divine wisdom and human reason butt into each other. How can a human being grasp that one simple, oral word should redeem forever from death? But let blindness go away, for we will discuss this beautiful passage.



He is speaking here not about the word of the Law, but of the Gospel, which talks about Christ, who died for our sins, etc. God could not send Christ out into the world in any other way. He had to put Him into the Word, and thus spread and present Him to everyone. Otherwise Christ would only be for Himself and remain unknown to us. Then He would have died for Himself alone. But because the Word presents Christ to us, it presents Him to us as the one who has overcome death, sin, and the devil. For that reason, whoever grasps and holds onto [the Word] grasps and holds onto Christ—and through the Word is set free from death eternally. Consequently, it is a Word of life, and it is true: whoever keeps it will not see death eternally [cf. John 8:51].

9. From this we can easily understand what He means by “keeping” [John 8:51], [namely,] that it is not said about the kind of keeping we do when we keep the Law with works. This word of Christ must be kept in the heart by faith, and not with the fist or with works. The Jews here understand it [about works], and horribly rage against Christ that Abraham and the prophets died [John 8:52], but they do not know what “keeping,” “dying,” or “living” mean. It is not for nothing that He calls it “keeping,” for it is a matter of struggling and fighting when sin bites, when death oppresses, and when hell pierces. Then it is called holding onto the Word and not being separated from it. Look at how Christ answers the Jews and praises His doctrine: “You say that My Word is of the devil and want to press it down to the bottom of hell. So I say again that it has divine power in it, and I exalt it above all the heavens and above all creatures.”

10. How does it happen, then, that we do not see or taste death, and yet Abraham and all the prophets die, even though they had God’s Word, as the Jews say? Here we must pay attention to the words of Christ, since He makes a distinction between death and seeing or tasting death. We must all go into death and die, but a Christian does not taste or see death; that is, he does not sense it, he is not terrified of it, and goes into it calmly and quietly, as if he were falling asleep, and yet he does not die. But a godless person senses it and is horrified of it forever. Thus “to taste death” can mean the power and might or bitterness of death; indeed, it is eternal death and hell.

The Word of God makes this distinction: A Christian has and keeps [the Word] in death, and for that reason he does not see death, but [he sees] life and Christ in the Word; for that reason he also does not sense death. But the godless person does not have the Word, and for that reason he sees no life but only death; so he also must sense [death], that is, bitter and eternal death.

11. Thus Christ means that whoever clings to His Word will, in the midst of death, not feel or see death, as He also says, “Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, for I am the life” (John 11 [:25]); that is, he does not sense death.



Here we see what a great thing it is to be a Christian, one who has already been eternally redeemed from death and can never die. His death or dying looks externally just like the dying of the godless, but inwardly there is as great a difference as between heaven and earth. The Christian sleeps in death and goes through [death] into life, but the godless goes from life and feels death eternally. We see how some tremble, doubt, despair, and become crazy and mad in their death throes.

For that reason, in Scripture death is called a "sleep" [cf. Ps. 13:3; Dan. 12:2; Matt. 9:24; John 11:11–14]. Just as anyone who falls asleep does not know what happens and wakes up in the morning unexpectedly, so we will suddenly rise on the Last Day and will not know how we came into death and through death.

12. Let us take a second example of this. When the children of Israel marched out of Egypt and came to the Red Sea, they were free and perceived no death, but only life. But when King Pharaoh came after them with all his forces, then they stood in the midst of death, and there was no more life in sight. In front of them was the sea through which they could not go, behind them was King Pharaoh, on both sides were high mountains. Everywhere they were captured and enclosed in death, so that they said to Moses: "Is it because there are not enough graves in Egypt," etc. [Exod. 14:11], so completely had they given up on life. Then Moses came and brought them God's Word, which comforted them in the midst of death and kept them alive, when he said, "Stand still and fear not, for you will see the great victory God will give, so that you shall never again see these Egyptians" [Exod. 14:13].

They clung to this Word and kept it. Through it life was seen in the midst of death, because they believed the Word, that it would happen, and so went into the middle of the Red Sea, which stood on both sides like two walls [Exod. 14:22]. Thus it happened that only life and safety were in the sea, where before there was only death and danger. They would never have been so bold as to go into the sea, even if it had been divided a hundred times, if God's Word had not been there to comfort them and promise them life. Thus man overcomes death through the Word of life, if he clings to it and believes it and goes into death with it.

13. So Christ also says here against the Jews that Abraham and the prophets are still alive and never died, but in the midst of death have life; they [only] lie down and sleep in death. "Abraham," He says, "saw My day, and was glad" [John 8:56]. So also the prophets saw it. Where and when did he see it? Not with bodily eyes, as the Jews understand it, but with the sight of faith in the heart; that is, he recognized Christ when it was said to him: "In your Seed shall all the Gentiles be blessed" (Genesis 22 [:18]). That is when he saw and understood that Christ, born of his seed through a pure virgin (so that



He would not be cursed with Adam's children but remain blessed), should suffer for the whole world, cause this to be preached, and so cover the whole world with blessing, etc.

This is the day of Christ, that is, the time of the Gospel, which is the light of this day, which gleams, shines, and enlightens the whole world about Christ, the sun of righteousness [Mal. 4:2]. It is a spiritual day, which nevertheless began at the time of Christ, as Abraham saw. However, the Jews understood none of this because of their carnal minds; for this reason they accuse Him of being a liar.

14. For this reason Christ goes further and establishes the basis and reason why it is just His Word and not the word of another which makes alive. He says it is because He was before Abraham, that is, because He is the one true God [John 8:58]. If the person who sacrificed Himself for us were not God, it would not help or avail before God at all if He were born from a virgin and suffered a thousand deaths. But what brings the blessing and the victory over all sin and death is that the Seed of Abraham is also the true God, who gives Himself for us.

Therefore, Christ is not speaking here about the human nature which they saw and experienced, for they could easily grasp that He was not yet fifty years old and had not been before Abraham [John 8:57]. With the same nature in which He was before Abraham so long ago, He was also before all creatures and before the whole world. According to His spiritual nature, He also became a man before Abraham; that is, through His Word and their knowledge of faith He was in the saints, for they all knew and believed that Christ, God and man, would suffer for us, as is written: "Christ [is the same] yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13 [:8]) and "The Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation [13:8]). Nevertheless, here He is speaking properly about His divine essence.

15. But here reason is terribly offended and becomes mad [at the idea] that man should be God, which makes no sense to them. This is the article at which the Jews to the present day take offense and cannot stop throwing stones and slandering. But, on the other hand, Christ also does not stop hiding Himself from them and going out of their temple [John 8:59], so that they can neither see nor find Him in the Scriptures, in which they search daily.

This history is not an insignificant terror to all who are presumptuous in Scripture and are not humble. At the present day it happens that many read and study in Scripture, and yet they cannot find Christ, for He has hidden Himself and gone out of their temple. How many there are who say with the mouth that God is man, and yet they are without the Spirit in their hearts! When things get serious, they will show that they never seriously meant it. This is enough on that.