

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent
John 8:46-59
by Peter Bockoven

The Text

46 Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? **47** Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.” **48** The Jews answered him, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” **49** Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. **50** Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. **51** Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” **52** 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.’ **53** Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?” **54** 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.’ **55** 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. **56** Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” **57** So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” **58** Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” **59** So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

The Sermon

One of the earliest Greek philosophers was a man called Thales. He was a person fascinated by the universe, and devoted all his time to studying it. So devoted, apparently, to the point of obsession.

There’s a funny story, or legend about him that shows this. It’s said that he was constantly looking up to the stars in the sky. Even when he would be going on a walk. So fixed was his attention on the stars, that one night, since he wasn’t looking at where he was going, he fell straight into a well.

And the stories about him also say that he was so obsessed with learning, that he didn’t care about money or possessions: he lived in poverty. Because of this people often criticized him and his philosophy. They thought that his work was of no practical, earthly value. Instead, his philosophy only harmed his earthly life.

I bring this story up because it can sometimes be a temptation to view Christ as not all that different than Thales. To think that Christianity is some complex philosophical system that doesn’t do anything for, or improve daily life. For example, I’m sure you’ve heard some criticisms of religion in general, Christianity included, that say that it only divides. It only causes war, and other kinds of suffering. What practical, earthly good is it?

But my friends, Christ is not a philosopher with his head in the clouds. His teachings are not so other-worldly, that they do not matter at all for our life. Instead, his ministry, his life, his death,

his teachings, are the most important things there could possibly be: and they are the most practical things that exist.

To show this, let's walk through the events of our text. We'll see how, in this exchange that Jesus has with the Jews, he makes this bold claim: "If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." And today we will answer: what does it mean to never see death? And how do we keep the word, so that we might never see death?

Just prior to the words of our text, Jesus had been making some bold claims about himself and his work before the Jewish leaders. He claimed that he was the light of the world. That a person is truly dead, if he doesn't believe in him. That his Father was no human, but God, who sent him into the world. That he has the power to show a person the ultimate truth of the universe, and to set him free.

It's after these things where our text starts up. The Jews charge Christ with being demon-possessed. How could this man, Jesus, make such bold claims? They knew he was from Nazareth. They knew who his earthly parents were. Therefore, they rejected him.

So Jesus in our text continues to ramp up the boldness of his claims about himself. He continues to clarify who he is and what his work is.

First, he claims that if anyone keeps his word, he will never die. He will be immortal. The Jews respond here, saying surely he's demon-possessed. No human can make anyone immortal, they thought. If anyone could, he would be greater than Abraham.

Next, Jesus responds: "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." As if to say: "Yes, I am greater than Abraham: he was looking forward to me. To me, in whom God's promises and plan of salvation is fulfilled."

The Jews then say: "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?"

To which Jesus makes this incredible claim. "Before Abraham was, I AM." Here he invokes the divine name of God, that God gave to Moses from the burning bush, when he called him to be prophet. So he shows the Jewish people that he is God himself.

So Christ makes these two claims: "I AM." And, "If anyone keeps my Word, he will never see death." You see how different Christ is from every other teacher. And you see how important his work is for our life. He's not a mere philosopher or teacher: he is God himself. And his word doesn't only teach you *about* life and death: it has the power to give you true life, and to save you from death.

Here you see how Jesus and his Word matters for daily life. All people know that, naturally speaking, death is not a good thing. We devote so much of our time and resources to delay or prevent death. We pour millions of dollars into the healthcare industry. Into the health and fitness industry. Into safety features for cars. Naturally, we all want to be freed from death. And the Lord Jesus says, by keeping his word, we can be.

But what does it mean to never die? Not that we will never go through physical death. And Jesus himself foretold the death of one of his disciples, at the end of John's Gospel. Peter's.

To see what Jesus is talking about here, then, we look at the earlier parts of John's Gospel. These themes, of life, death, and resurrection, are ones that Jesus has been preaching about throughout John's Gospel.

First look at John 5. There, Jesus had just healed a crippled man on the Sabbath. The Jews were trying to kill him for blasphemy. In this context, Jesus teaches: "Whoever hears my word and believes in him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life ... An hour is coming, and now is here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live."

Later in John 6, after Jesus had fed the 5,000, which we read of last week, Jesus taught: "This is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day ... Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life."

Then, jump forward to John 11. There Jesus is speaking with Martha, the sister of Lazarus, the friend of Jesus who had just died. Before he raised Lazarus back to life again, he said to Martha: "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."

So we see that Jesus taught about two kinds of deaths that he saves his people from. The first takes place here and now, even before our bodies die. This is the death of unbelief and sin. Naturally, we are born in sin. We don't know the true God, and we don't know his will. But Jesus changes that: he shows us the true God, since he's his Son, and he gives us faith by his Holy Spirit and the new Christian life. This is the first life that Jesus gives us: this is our first resurrection from the dead. This is what Jesus teaches in John 5.

And the second kind of death is physical death. Jesus saves us from that one, also. We see this powerfully in John 6 and 11. "I'm the resurrection," Jesus says. "I'm the one who raise people to life. On the last day, when I return, I will raise up those who believe in me back to life."

Those are the deaths that Jesus saves us from. The death of sin and unbelief; and the death of the body. So Jesus says: "If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." He will be saved from the death of sin; and he will be saved from the death of the body on the last day.

What incredible promises! But how is it that we "keep" Christ's word, so that we might live forever?

Well, look at what Christ said. "If anyone keeps my word ..." The word one keeps is a word that especially belongs and is related to Christ and his person and work.

Now you remember, that there are two main words of the Bible: the law and the Gospel. Now both are Christ's words, of course. But which one is *especially* related to Christ? Certainly the Gospel! The message of the free forgiveness of sins in his name, on account of his life of

obedience to the law, and on account of his death for the world's sins. This is the unique word of Christ. Our Epistle lesson shows that, for example. It describes Christ and his unique work: Christ was a high-priest before God, who poured out his blood to buy us back to God and to clean our conscience and to give us an everlasting home.

How does one keep this message, or promise of the forgiveness of sins? Simply by faith. Because a promise, or a message of good news, is something that is simply believed: there is nothing that we do to earn it.

Here our Lord teaches this wonderful promise, then: He gives you resurrection from the death of sin and unbelief, and he will give you resurrection from your physical death at the last day. How do you receive this? Not by your works: but simply by keeping his word, by believing it.

Remember this! Jesus is no philosopher. He is God and man. He is the Son of the Father. By his death, he obtained forgiveness and life for you: and through faith, he gives you life from the dead. He's freed you from sin and unbelief. You've had that resurrection now. And when he returns, he will raise up your body back to life again to life forever. That's your resurrection coming up.

These promises change everything. These promises give meaning and value and significance for your life. By faith in Christ, your life is no longer like a flower, that one day is growing beautiful, but the next day withers away. Instead, your life is like a beautiful tree, as Psalm 1 says, that is planted firmly by the living waters, that will grow continually, and even into eternity. You have nothing but a blessed, happy, eternal life, with God and all believers coming up for you, even though your earthly body may die. May God grant us to treasure these promises with all our heart. They are truly life-changing. Amen.