

The Radical Rabbi Who Thought He Was God

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Head of Jesus" (1890) by Enrique Simonet

Prayer of Illumination

Startle us, O God, with your truth
and open our hearts and our minds
to your wondrous love.
Speak your word to us,
silence in us any voice but your own
and be with us now as we turn our attention,
our minds and our hearts, to you,
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

Picture yourself in the scene of our gospel reading: and imagine a prime-time cosmic courtroom drama. Seated as judge is "Your Honor" of the Supreme Court of the Universe—God Almighty. Arguments and counter arguments fly back and forth between the prosecutor and defense, between

the Pharisees and Jesus. Jesus is on the witness stand and he's being grilled. Accusations fly. But throughout his entire testimony, he isn't phased or rattled by the opposition. Jesus tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—so help him God. In fact, that's all Jesus can do because he himself is the truth. The religious leaders, however, commit perjury under oath. After the interrogation, it's Jesus turn to cross-examine the Jewish leaders. He also makes claims about himself that are nothing short of astounding.

*You are from below, I am from above.
You are of this world, I'm not of this world.
You don't know God and you don't know me.
I know God.*

*If you obey my word,
you are truly my disciples,
and you will know the truth,
and the truth will set you free.*

Let's see how the rest of this courtroom drama plays itself out:

Gospel Reading: John 8:48-59 (NRSV)

The Jews answered Jesus, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" He 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.

Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death." The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say, 'Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?" Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, 'He is our God,' though you do not know him.

But I know him; if I would 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 ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad." Then the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell 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.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.
Thanks be to God.*

SERMON – The Radical Rabbi Who Thought He Was God

Jesus is so relatable because of his humanity.

Jesus slept—he got tired, like we do.

Jesus wept—he felt emotional pain, like we do.

Jesus got angry—when he turned over the tables in the temple.

Jesus got hungry—he ate fish with the disciples.

Jesus got thirsty—one of his last words on the cross was I thirst.

Jesus grew weak physically—Simon of Cyrene had to help him carry his cross.

Jesus let out a cry of pain on the cross before he breathed his last and “gave up his spirit.”

Jesus was tempted in every way, just like us, except that he was the only human ever not to take a bite from that delicious, low-hanging, juicy forbidden fruit. Jesus learned obedience by what he suffered.

At the same time, Jesus had this bad habit of thinking that he was God. In our passage, he makes claim after claim that, if you’re paying attention, is rather shocking. His words hadn’t quite clicked yet with the disciples, but the Pharisees knew exactly what Jesus was saying. And they wanted to kill him because of his words.

“To see me is to see God.”

“I and the Father are one.”

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

“Before Abraham was, I AM.”

Jesus is radical because he didn’t let us come to the safe conclusion that he was just another great moral teacher. He was more demanding than that. He’s still demanding today. If we take his word seriously, we’ll have to come to the conclusion that Jesus is one of three things: either a Mad Man, a Con Man, or the God Man.

Think about Jesus’ words and actions:

- He healed.
- Forgave sins.
- Performed miracles.
- Rose from the dead.

If you really dig into his teachings, you might be tempted to not only think that Jesus had delusions of grandeur, but that he had a God complex. Who does he think he is? We too might pick up stones to cast at him. Jesus, are we not right in saying that, “You are a Samaritan and have a demon?” Basically, Jesus you’re not only a law-breaker and a heretic, but you’re possessed.

In that day, Jews believed that Samaritans were demon possessed because they worshiped other gods. In fact the Aramaic word for Samaritan is *Shomeroni*. Not to be confused with rice-a-roni. *Shomeron* was also the word used for “prince of devils.”

Jesus retorts, "It is not I that have a demon, it is you." It's all too easy to resort to name-calling. Demonizing others. We see it all around us. On social media, political ads, and conversations.

Most of church history is a painful record of Christians demonizing Jews. Today we demonize those we disagree with. We demonize other denominations. Demonize other nations. Demonize the opposing political party. It's time I think for us to cast out all this demonizing.

Jesus spoke honestly and humbly—speaking the truth in love, and he didn't mince words either. Jesus didn't judge, but he wasn't merely tolerant. He discerned people's hearts—and called them on it. He wasn't judgmental in his judgment. He spoke with candor, but wasn't vindictive.

Although Jesus was without sin, Jesus could have, but didn't, cast the first stone. Instead, he willingly suffered and died for his enemies. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." But the religious leaders turned to violence. Jesus didn't and Jesus doesn't. He doesn't fight back or resist, but simply slips away and disengages. We would all do well to learn from Jesus when tempers flare and accusations fly. But he also didn't get walked on.

"I'm not possessed. I'm not a mad man." I honor my Father but you dishonor me. Dishonoring me is dishonoring my Father. I don't care about my own glory—I'm here to honor my Father. It's the Father who glorifies me.

You know, it's not difficult to go through life honoring yourself—basking in the sunshine of your own approval and accomplishments—defending your name. But Jesus knew that all true honor comes from his Father. He was free, he didn't have to be embroiled with fussing and fighting over his honor and what others thought of him. He didn't give a rip. He knew all glory received from human sources was trivial and temporary. He pointed to and lived for what was most important: receiving approval and glory from God. Jesus was comfortable in his own skin. He knew why he was here. And he wasn't ashamed of it. He knew his Father had his back.

The radical rabbi also stood up for himself because he was the very embodiment of truth. He stood for the truth. "Your father Abraham was overjoyed to see my day; he saw it and was glad."

Who are you making yourself out to be, Jesus? Who do you think you are? Are you greater than our father Abraham? I mean, come on Jesus, you're in the prime of your life—you haven't even reached the age of 50, when priests retire from temple service. How can you have seen Abraham?

The Rabbis in Jesus day had a belief that while Abraham was alive, God showed him a vision of the future of Israel. And in that vision Abraham saw the coming Messiah and he rejoiced. Jesus was saying that he is the One in whom Abraham rejoiced in his vision from God. But Jesus went even further: Truly, truly I say unto you—or more literally translated, "Amen, Amen I say unto you,"—"before Abraham was, I AM."

Do you remember the name that God used when he revealed himself to Moses in the Burning Bush?

I AM who I AM.

I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I am the God, not of the dead, but of the living. Yes you will die—like everyone before us. Abraham, the Prophets, and all of us someday. But when you know

and follow the Great I AM—even though you die, you will live. We go not from life to death, but from life to life. We need to hear this Immanuel, after we've had six deaths in the last six weeks. Jesus is saying something incredible, something outlandish here: he's speaking of his timelessness, his eternity, his divine preexistence, his connection, and his continuation with God's appearance and actions in the past.

There's only one person in the universe that's timeless—and that's God. Do you remember how the Gospel of John begins?

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... full of grace and truth."

One scholar put it this way:

"With Jesus' statement here, no clearer implication of divinity is found in the Gospel tradition."

Or as the author of Hebrews puts it:

"Christ is the same yesterday, today, and *what?* ...forever."

And Jesus still says to us today:

I AM forever I AM.
I WAS, I AM, and I WILL BE always and forever: I AM.
Even in a pandemic, I am still I AM.
When you're tired of being alone, I AM is with you.

Jesus comes before, not only Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah—Jesus comes before everything in our lives.

Before my comforts...Jesus is.
Before my career...Jesus is.
Before my successes...Jesus is.
Before my national identity...Jesus is.
Before my political party...Jesus is.

Jesus is...the resurrection and the life.
Jesus is...the Good Shepherd.
Jesus is...the gate.
Jesus is...the Light of the World.
Jesus is...the true vine.
Jesus is...the bread of life.
Jesus is...the way, the truth, and the life.

Jesus, the eternal and great I AM, delivered the death blow to death.

There's no getting around it: Jesus was equating himself with God.

A man saying that he is God is one of the most shocking things a human being could ever utter. We can cast stones at him for this. Or we can drop everything and follow him.

A car is designed to run on fuel or some cars on electricity—it will only work if fuel is poured in or the battery is charged. In the same way, we human beings were created to run on God—God is our divine energy, it's in him that we live and move and have our being. Let's fill ourselves up on Christ.

When we're feeling down or our battery is dead, let's get recharged with the divine electricity of the Spirit of Christ.

Jesus is both Son of Man—the Human One (like us)—and at the same time, Son of God (just like the Father). He's not only by our side right now, he's inside us—making us like him—transforming us into little christs.

Novelist James Joyce once half-jokingly said, "The demand I make of my reader is that he should devote his whole life to reading my works."

Jesus had the bad habit of demanding that we devote our whole lives to follow him. He doesn't want a part of us, he wants all of us. Jesus wants to be not only the plot of your life, but the pilot of your life. He can rewrite and revise the story of your life and make it a masterpiece—the Great American novel.

The good news is that you're not here just to mimic Jesus in your own strength. Rather, Jesus is here to manifest himself in you and through you. We just have to let him do it. We aren't complete, we aren't fully ourselves, until we find ourselves in Christ.

Get caught up into Christ's life. We don't merely follow a good man who died two thousand years ago, we follow a Living Man who died and rose again and enters into us, so that we might die to our old life, and let his life spring to life in us.

If you want to know how God wants us to live—look at Jesus' life.

If you want to know who God is—look at Jesus.

Yes, Jesus is the Radical Rabbi who not only thought he was God, he's the Radical Rabbi who is God—the great I AM.

Amen.

The New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.