

Bible Studies for Life Series for February 18: When you see Jesus, you see God

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• John 5:17-23,36-42,46-47

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My mother likes to tell a story about me when I was just a small child. It seems I had very definite ideas about who I was and what I should be called.

I am named for my father Kenneth Ralph Lyle, which makes me Kenneth Ralph Lyle Jr. I have never liked being Kenneth, Kenny, or worse yet, Junior. I have always preferred being called Ken. I suspect that preference stems from the fact that my father most often is called Ken.

When I was a little boy, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends got a big kick out of calling me Kenneth and waiting for my angered reply: "I'm not Kenneth! I'm Ken Lyle, Jr.!"



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Like father like son, or so the saying goes. With my own son, Walker, the connection rests not on our sharing the same name but stems from our similar features and modes of expression. Hardly a day goes by when someone does not say to me: “Walker is your spitting image.” When Walker was about 3 years old, like father like son took on a whole new meaning.

We were driving down a particular stretch of highway in Louisville, Ky., that was always filled with traffic. On previous occasions, when I had been in a hurry, I had made my displeasure with the crowded conditions very clear. On this day, however, I was in no particular hurry, but Walker, in his car seat was having none of it. As I sat patiently waiting for the light to change and the cars to start moving, Walker in his best imitation of me pounded on his car seat and yelled out, “Get out of the way you idiot!” Like father like son, indeed.

When you see the son, you see the father. This is perhaps the strongest and most important claim Jesus makes in John’s Gospel. Unlike the negative picture you might have of me in view of the actions of my young son; the Gospel of John makes it absolutely clear that God, the creator and sustainer of the universe, is seen and understood most clearly in the person of Jesus.

John makes this explicit claim from the very beginning: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). From that astounding opening assertion, the gospel continues reflecting on and amplifying that essential claim—like father, like son.

The focal passages come at the beginning of a cycle of events in John's Gospel that center on a series of Jewish festivals. Here, an "unnamed feast" is the occasion for a miraculous healing of a man who had been "invalid for 38 years" (John 5:5). The narrative provides several interesting details about the healing, including information about the pool beside the Sheep Gate and the tradition about why sick people waited there for healing.

Most intriguing is the account of the conversation between Jesus and the man, including Jesus' query, "Do you want to get well?" From a man 38 years invalid, the answer should have been obvious, yet his answer seems to indicate he had lost hope of ever receiving healing. Jesus heals the man, and then the narrative takes a dark turn.

Jesus' healing action takes place on the Sabbath, and it sets in motion events which allow Jesus to reflect publicly on his vital intimate connection to God the Father. The healed man is caught violating Sabbath work rules by carrying his mat (John 5:10-13). The man's interaction with the legalistic religious folks points them to Jesus as the perpetrator of this transgression, and they begin to persecute Jesus. Jesus' answer to these legalistic religious folks provides an explicit claim of unique and unbreakable connectedness between Jesus and God the Father (vv. 17-23).

Jesus invokes powerful witnesses to the truthfulness of his claim. Jesus does not witness to himself (vv. 31-32); rather, he points to the testimony of John the Baptist (vv. 33-35); the testimony of his own mighty works (v. 36); the testimony of the Father (vv. 37-38); and the testimony of Scripture (vv. 39-40).

None of these proofs are adequate for Jesus' opponents, but we should not expect them to be. Jesus concludes his statements to them with a resignation to their hardness of hearts: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?" (vv. 46-47).

John's earlier claim, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (1:11) receives powerful corroborating evidence. The people who should have recognized Jesus most clearly, most clearly reject him.

That this story and discourse comes in the context of a cycle of festivals points to the clear contrast between those who see God in Jesus and those who see God in rules and regulations. Jesus comes to say that sometimes even institutionalized religious practices get in the way of seeing God at work in the world. Jesus is Lord of the festival, Lord of the Sabbath, Lord of creation. Jesus is the very intention of God, and when we see and experience Jesus, we see and experience God.

The sad truth is that some may never grasp or be grasped by this fundamental truth. John tells us "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14). While it is true many beheld the glory of God in Christ, it is equally true that some just saw flesh.

For those who need absolute proof, there will never be enough—for those who experience God in and through Jesus Christ, absolute proof is not necessary. Like father, like son indeed—when you see Jesus, you see God.

Discussion questions

- Jesus' claims of a special, unbreakable connection to the Father come in the context of challenges to his right to heal on the Sabbath. Is it possible we sometimes place limits on the lordship of Jesus over every aspect of life?
- Do you feel a need to have absolute proof of Jesus' status as "the Word become flesh"?

- When you look at Jesus, what do you learn about God?

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