

## ***The Conflicting Testimony of the Crowds about Christ***

John 7:12-46

The Gospel of John Sermon Series

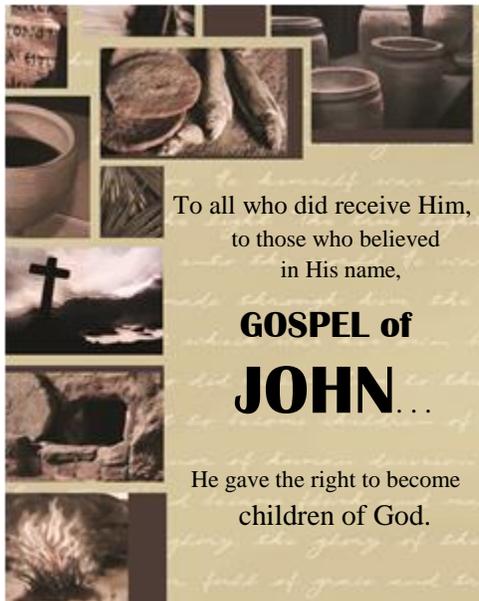
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

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**TEXT:** John 7:12-46

We continue this morning in the Gospel of John through a series of testimonies about Jesus. So far we have heard a set of clear testimonies full of conviction, light and clarity; testimonies like



that of John himself, John the Baptist, Mary, Nicodemus, the woman at the well of Samaria, and last Sunday the climactic and decisive testimony of God the Father, Himself. This morning, things are going to get confusing. We are going to shift and look at the conflicting testimony of the crowds about Jesus.

The testimony of the crowds is jumbled, divergent, full of partial information, containing fragments of truth and misperceptions. The testimony of the crowds is full of conversions and condescension, animosity toward Jesus, and wonder. The crowds are filled with people who feel violent opposition toward Jesus, and many others who are coming to believe. The conflicting testimony of the

crowds in the first century is very much like the conflicting testimony of the crowds in our time. Yet, there is one characteristic that the crowds share: All of these people share conversation about Jesus. What they have in common is that they're all talking about Jesus. In fact, Jesus is the most interesting person who ever lived. His teachings are the most stimulating of all and the most thought-provoking. There is one characteristic action of Jesus in this passage that is the model for us all: Jesus frequently and consistently engages the crowd in conversation. Episodic moments, where Jesus corrects a misperception or teaches more of His Person, and they are loud, mixed conversations. The conflicting testimony of the crowds is like walking down the packed sidewalks of the back roads of Hong Kong, one of the most densely populated areas on the planet. The conflicting testimony of the crowds draws us in and sets before us a great challenge. The challenge that I want for you from John 7 is to actually believe that people all around you are interested in Jesus and are talking about Him. They have parts of the story,

and you must, if you are a follower of Jesus, enter into that conversation. They need you to intersect with their lives in episodic kinds of moments whenever you become available to them.

John 7 takes place in a great crowd setting. It takes place at the Feast of Tabernacles in the Temple court of Jerusalem. The Temple court of Jerusalem was the largest public square in the



ancient world. This Temple court was expanded with a massive retaining wall by Herod the Great, and this courtyard can accommodate 200,000 people. You can have a great conversation with 200,000 people swelling into these courts. We read in John 7:12-13:

*“Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about Him. Some said, ‘He is a good man.’ Others replied, ‘No, He deceives the people.’ But no one would say anything publicly about Him for fear of the Jews.”*

Notice that right at the beginning there are three points of view expressed:

1. He is a good man. Condescension.
2. No, He deceives the people. A negative judgment.
3. No one spoke publicly. Silent majority.

The first reaction to Jesus is: “He’s a good man. He has done some miracles like multiplying the bread, and He is drawing people to God. I like that.” I imagine this to be the kind of proud, genteel person who condescendingly makes a judgment about Him. There is problem with that point of view as it requires nothing of the listener.

The second reaction to Jesus is a negative judgment about Him: “No, in fact, He’s deceiving the people.” That is a very different judgment of Jesus, claiming He is a deceiver of the people, leading them astray.

Then, the third reaction to Jesus is from a large number of people who are keeping their point of view about Jesus to themselves: They remain silent. They are not speaking out publicly, even though they are thinking about Him. Many people are in this category. They have questions about Jesus, but somehow they think that they can’t bring those questions out into the open.

The response of Jesus to this mix of voices is to go into the Temple courts and begin to teach. This is the first image of Jesus’ engaging the crowds. He goes into the sea of voices and begins

to communicate and teach.

In John 7:15, we get yet a fourth reaction to Jesus from some of the religious leaders:

*"The Jews were amazed and asked, 'How did this man get such learning without having studied?'"*

The word *Jews* in the Gospel of John is usually used for religious leaders. The religious leaders are astonished at Jesus' teaching, and they ask: *"How did this man get such learning without having studied?"* This would be like someone's coming into Music Hall and playing Rachmaninoff's *Third Piano Concerto* and everyone claps. Then, someone asks: "Who was your teacher?" The pianist says: "You know, I just picked it up." Jesus' teaching was astonishing. It is a signal of the origin of Jesus. Where does Jesus get this teaching? He has no degree framed on His wall, and yet His teaching is like none other. They are amazed at the teachings of Jesus. It is true that no one ever spoke like this Man. Jesus, however, responds to the specific question in John 7:16 by saying:

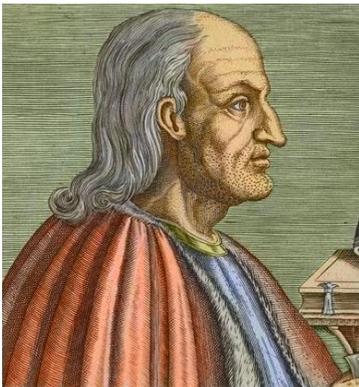
*"My teaching is not My own. It comes from Him who sent Me."*

Jesus says that He has come from God and is speaking the words of God. Then, in John 7:17, Jesus says the most remarkable thing to the sea of voices around Him:

*"If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether My teaching comes from God or whether I speak on My own."*

Jesus sets out a challenge to the crowds on this point. He says: "If you do the will of God, then you will know that My teaching is of God." This is a great inversion of how we tend to think. Most of us tend to think: I will find out information; I will learn things; and then I will do them. But, Jesus says it's the other way around. Jesus says you must do; you must believe the work of God. If you do the will of God, then you will know. If you really want to understand what's going on around you, you must begin with belief.

Anselm of Canterbury was the leader of the church in the 12th century, and Anselm said this very famous line:



*Credo ut intelligam.* "I believe so that I may understand."

In other words, belief opens the gateway of understanding, does not close it. It also means that you do not understand everything and then believe. Do you see the difference? Many are waiting until they understand everything. Would that I understood it all and then I will believe. That's like saying: "I will not use my computer again until I can explain how it works." That's like saying: "I've made my last phone call until I can satisfactorily explain how this is working." Jesus says if

you do the will of God, then you will know the origin of this teaching.

John 7:17 was the decisive verse for Rosaria Butterfield whom I mentioned two weeks ago, the English professor from Syracuse who came a long journey to believe in Jesus Christ. As she tells the story, it was this very idea of John 7:17 that finally pushed her over the threshold. She said:

*“My whole academic training had taught me that I must know things and then do them, and here's this One saying you cannot know until you do; you cannot know the reality until you actually commit; you cannot know the taste of honey until you taste it; you cannot know that it's safe to go into the water until you go in.”*

Jesus says: “You will know by doing the will of God.”

Jesus's words challenge the crowd. The conversation gets louder, there are more voices, and we see a fifth reaction to Jesus in John 7:20. Some of the crowd make a radical judgment about Jesus and say:

*“You are demon-possessed.”*

“What You're doing, You are doing by the power of evil,” which is a radical judgment against Jesus. Yet notice that Jesus responds again. Jesus teaches in John 7:23-24:

*“Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath? Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment.”*

It's a radically wrong judgment to say that Jesus is working by the power of the devil, and Jesus says you've got to judge rightly. The question is: “Where did this man get such learning?” and Jesus responds to it and engages those in the crowd. Your family members and colleagues and coworkers and friends have questions that seem random, and you intersect with them at these unpredictable intervals. You have to be unending in your commitment just to clarify the perception of who Jesus is, where He comes from, and what the meaning of this Person is?

Jesus never stops engaging these crowds. Notice, not in our text this morning but in other places in the Gospels, we hear that when Jesus saw the crowds of people, His dominant response to them was of a moving compassion. Jesus is never outraged at the crowds for not knowing more than they do. The crowds speak again in John 7:26-27, and here we see the sixth reaction. The crowds say:

*“Have the authorities really concluded that He is the Christ? But we know where this man is from; when the Christ comes, no one will know where He is from.”*

You see this picture of the crowd, and they're just completely mixed up. They don't know, and

they wonder if the people who really know have seen that He is the Messiah. They're ready to be carried further with public opinion, and they are confused. Yet, Jesus speaks again in John 7:28:

*"Then Jesus, still teaching in the Temple courts, cried out, 'Yes, you know Me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on My own, but He who sent Me is true.'"*

In John 7:31, the crowd changes again:

*"Many in the crowd put their faith in Him. They said, 'When the Christ comes, will He do more miraculous signs than this man?'"*

I think this verse is surprising and thrilling because it says that at this point many in the crowd believed. You just don't know when someone you're talking with is ready to trust Jesus. You don't know if this is the last question they have. You don't know if yours is their final encounter with a Christian who seems to care about them and that this conversation will be the one that tips them right over the edge. Many put their faith in Him.

Many people believing creates a further storm of controversy. In John 7:32 we read:

*"The Pharisees heard the crowd whispering such things about Him. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees sent Temple guards to arrest Him."*

The Pharisees, the religious leaders, have had enough. So they send some of the Temple guards to arrest Jesus. Keep an eye on this little group of people, a little cluster of guards who go out to arrest Jesus. He continues to teach in the Temple courts; a crowd has believed; and now He speaks to this large assembled gathering of people and says in John 7:37-38:

*"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. "*

Josephus tells us that the population of Jerusalem swelled to more than 2 million people at the time of these great festivals. There were 200,000 on the Temple Mount platform; the city was bursting with people, and Jesus cries out publicly: *"If anyone is thirsty, come to Me and drink. If you believe in Me, then a stream of living life-giving water will flow from within you."* When Jesus says: *"... as the Scripture has said,"* what Scripture is that?

Maybe it's Isaiah 55:1 where the Lord says:

*"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters."*

Or, perhaps it's Psalm 36:7-8:

*"How precious is Your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of Your wings. They feast on the abundance of Your house, and You give them drink from the river of Your delights."*

I think the image that Jesus has in mind, though, is from Ezekiel. In Ezekiel chapters 40-48 is the longest single prophetic vision in the Old Testament. In these chapters, there is an extended vision of restoration. Ezekiel's prophetic ministry began with of a painful sighting of God's departure from His own people. The sin of God's people was so great that it drove out the presence of the holy God, and Ezekiel saw it. He saw God leave. God promised him that He would one day return. The way that God communicated His return to Ezekiel is in the return of God's own presence, His holy presence. It is a vision of a restored sanctuary and place of worship. Ezekiel sees the place of worship described in great detail, and at the climax of this vision, we read in Ezekiel 47:1:

*"Then [the angel] brought me back to the door of the Temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the Temple toward the east. The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the Temple, south of the altar."*

Then, we read in Ezekiel 47:2:

*"He brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east; and behold, the water was trickling out on the south side."*

We read in Ezekiel 47:3-5 that the angel takes Ezekiel further out:

*"Going on eastward with a measuring line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits, and then led me through the water, and it was ankle-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was knee-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and led me through the water, and it was waist-deep. Again he measured a thousand, and it was a river that I could not pass through, for the water had risen. It was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through."*

This is strange water; it is water coming from the place of God's throne. It starts as a trickle and it gets deeper as it gets further out.

In Ezekiel 47, the image is of God's water flowing out from the place of God's dwelling. It renews the world and renews people and is an image of God's own Holy Spirit's renewing presence on the earth. And Jesus says: "If you want the Spirit of God to overwhelm you and to cause you to be born again, to wash your sins away, the way you get that is by believing in Me." This is a staggering image. Jesus says: "If you want to be remade, renewed, come to Me."

Alison Bucklin is an American poet, and she wrote a poem based on the imagery of Ezekiel 47 and God's coming into her life. She says:

"My old songs sprang up from a bitter well,  
And were contrived to channel off the flow  
Into a guarded land, a distant hell  
Which I could view apart, and then let go.

But now before me seems a river sweet  
And clear, which runs into a land unknown.  
The only songs I know are for retreat,  
For stepping back, aloof, afraid, alone.

I shall not force this new geography  
Into old paths of pain, but tentative  
Let this bright stream create new songs in me  
Whose forms I do not know, yet form must give.

I will not make the music: I will be  
The song itself, while so You flow through me."

God's renewing, His life-giving presence comes to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus says: "If you want that, then come to Me." He never stops saying that and calling people. That's what it means to be converted: to believe in Jesus. So I'm asking you to keep praying for people to be converted through this series. It has happened, and for us who know Him, pray for new life, this life-giving stream that comes to us in Jesus.

When the people heard these words in John 7:40, there was a mixed reaction:

*"On hearing His words, some of the people said, 'Surely this man is the Prophet.' Others said, 'He is the Christ.' Still others asked, 'How can the Christ come from Galilee?'"*

There were more questions. Others wanted to seize Him and lay a hand on Him, and John tells us in John 7:43 that:

*"Thus the people were divided because of Jesus."*

There was a schism, a division, among the people. The crowd was still mixed with uncertain, divergent reactions. The scene closes with the little group of men that went out from among them to arrest Jesus. They came back to the religious leaders, but they came back empty-handed. They came back without having arrested Jesus. The religious leaders asked them in John 7:45:

*"Why didn't you bring Him in?"*

This group of Temple guards, who are my favorite little set of characters of this passage, come back and they say in John 7:46:

*“No one ever spoke the way this man does,”*

“We went to arrest Him, but no one ever talked as He did, so we didn't bring Him, and we want to hear a little more of that teaching.” You see, the crowds are confused and mixed up. They have fragments of the story. But people here, with a mission to arrest Jesus, on just one exposure lay open their hands and say: “We’re not grabbing hold of Him. We want to hear a little more about that.”

So, I want to challenge you this morning with what I said at the very beginning: to believe that people are interested in talking about Jesus, and you should be, too. If there are things that interest you more than Jesus, something is out of order. But, if there is this interest, then it is upon us to engage the conversation. You don't have to answer every question. Just share what you know, and don't keep it to yourself. Let people have exposure to Jesus. This is such an easy invitation. It is really nonthreatening. Would you join me in believing that the crowds have these questions? Would you take that courageous step to engage them, where they are, with the question they have, with the opportunity God places in front of you? If you are here this morning as part of the crowd, with lots of questions and unsure, I just want to end by inviting you to do, that is, to believe, in order that you might know. The work that God requires of any of us is, above all, to believe in the One whom He has sent.

Please pray with me. Father, we thank You for this morning. We thank You for all of the voices speaking at the same time in John 7. It's a lot like our world. Father, we thank You that these voices have partial information and different reactions. We thank You, Lord, that it's a moving target. People are coming to faith; people are wanting to hear more; people are abandoning their hostility and finding, in Jesus, streams of living water. I pray, Father, that You would bring about conversion, a new life, in and through the ministry of the church, and that we would hold on tightly to Christ, for He is all we have.

In Jesus' name, Amen.