

GOSPEL WISDOM

WEEK 2: DIVINELY QUALIFIED

All of us, I suppose, could look back and think of a favourite teacher. But what made him or her special for you? I also suppose that if we were to discuss the qualities that make a memorable teacher, we would come up with many different views on what such qualifications would be. They might range from the lovely personality of an otherwise hopeless teacher, to really knowing their subject or even not giving a lot of homework. But remembering a favourite teacher for years, sometimes decades after you've left school or college, is nothing compared to being remembered for almost two millennia. Faith in Jesus as the God-Man is rejected by our modern world. Yet, while Jesus' ethics are lauded, and rightly so, there is so much more to His teaching. And because the world goes no further than Jesus' ethical teaching, as Christians, we need to look more closely at why everything that Jesus taught is as relevant today as it was when He taught it.

It is very easy for us to simply say we accept Jesus as our Teacher because He is the Son of God, our Saviour and our Lord and He will only teach the truth. But, if we were pressed to give more explicit reasons why we should be heeding everything Jesus taught, what would be our answer? Last week we concluded that gospel wisdom was embodied in the Person of Jesus Christ and started looking at why we believe that. But, In the face of the world's rejection of the Bible as the infallible word of God, as those who want to love and obey it, we need to be able to say why we believe it. We need to delve a bit more deeply into why it is so important to hold on to the faith to follow the ways Jesus taught. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith and we need to be sure in our own minds that this is true, because if we are not convinced of it, others we come into contact with won't be either.

Faith is the belief that all that Jesus said during His earthly ministry is true. That does not come naturally - that, as we discussed last week - is a work of the Holy Spirit. There will be many occasions when doubt will raise its head. When Jesus healed the demon-possessed boy, the boy's father summed up the difficulty. He wanted to believe, but everything in his cultural and religious upbringing was militating against it. But at least he admitted the potential of faith in Jesus. This has to be contrasted with those who simply refused to believe in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

**24 Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief
(Mark 9:24 NIV)**

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**37 Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him
(John 12:37 NIV)**

It would be thought that it would have been easy for Jesus to preach and teach a people who already accepted the existence of God and believed utterly in the fulfilment of His promise of a Messiah. Jesus' struggles, however, show how hard it was to break through the mindset of people who had already decided the credentials of the only kind of Messiah they could accept. Most of the challenges and criticisms that did come, centred on Jesus' claims about Himself. Today, we would put that criticism in the saying - "Self praise is no recommendation." But Jesus' answer to that criticism takes the ground from under it. In Jewish law, two witnesses were all it took to decide an issue, even when it was a matter of life and death.

**But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days. '"
(Matthew 26:60-61 NIV)**

**In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is true. I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me."
(John 8:17-18 NIV)**

Jesus made it perfectly clear on numerous occasions that He was no self-appointed religious guru. He knew exactly God's plan for His life in this world and He determined to fulfil it even when it led to His own death. And Jesus had Scriptural backing for His claims for God had revealed to Isaiah that a Teacher would be sent. And Jesus said that He was that Teacher.

Isaiah 30:20-21

.....but your Teacher will not hide Himself any longer. Your eyes will see your Teacher, and whenever you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear this command behind you: "This is the way. Walk in it."

**Whoever speaks on their own does so to gain personal glory, but he who seeks the glory of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him
(John 7:18 NIV)**

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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 authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, but I know him because I am from him and he sent me.”

(John 7:28-29 NIV)

All that Jesus said and did during His earthly ministry was at the behest of God the Father and in obedience to all God required of His life. Hence to disbelieve Jesus’ words, was in fact, rejecting the God who had sent Him to say them.

There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day. 49 For I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken. 50 I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.”

(John 12:48-50 NIV)

I’m not sure if witnesses in a court case are still required to swear on a Bible that they would tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In other words they would be invoking the God of the Bible as witness to their testimony. This was intended to give credibility to their account of events. Yet when Jesus did exactly the same thing in many instances it provoked the opposite response and still does so to the present day. As Christians, we accept that in order to claim God’s sanction for the truth of every word He spoke, Jesus told the truth about everything including who and what He was.

That is why when we ask Who is qualified to teach us ‘gospel wisdom’, we can turn to the words of Jesus to provide us with those credentials. John 13:19 gives us our introduction.

“I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am who I am.

(John 13:19 NIV)

Now, compare the expression “I am who I am” with these texts from Exodus and Isaiah.

God said to Moses, “ I am who I am.” This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “ ‘ I am ‘ has sent me to you.” (Exodus 3:14 NIV)

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“I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols.

(Isaiah 42:8 NIV)

Jesus’ statement “I am who I am” which He knew was the name of God given to Moses and in the knowledge that God would not yield the glory of His name to another, was clear teaching that He Himself was divine and inextricably identified with God. This could not be clearer than His words to His disciples after He had washed their feet that I quoted last week.

John 13:13

You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord’ and rightly so, for that is what I am.

More indirectly, He sought the public view of the identity of ‘I am’ when He asked the disciples that question.

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

17 Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. (Matthew 16:15-17 NIV)

Jesus did not disagree with that statement! Also, when John, at a much later date, stated that the **“Word was with God”** he was only saying what Jesus had stated indirectly when He told the crowd:

John 8:58

“Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!”

‘Very truly’ puts emphasis on the fact that Jesus is claiming pre-existence. The claim was so outrageous that the crowd attempted to stone Him. But the claim to pre-existence combined with the words ‘I am’ were blatant and extremely serious blasphemy to Jews who knew such verses like those in Exodus and Isaiah. Jesus, in effect was claiming all the attributes of all the ‘I am’ words of God in the Old Testament, identifying and equating Himself with God. In our study of John we saw that Jesus explicitly told His disciples that if they knew Him they also knew the Father.

If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him

(John 14:7 NIV)

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In fact, it was this teaching of Jesus about Himself that sealed His death warrant for Mark records:

.....Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”

62 “I AM,” SAID JESUS. “AND YOU WILL SEE THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE MIGHTY ONE AND COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN.”

63 The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked. 64 “You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?”

They all condemned him as worthy of death.

(Mark 14:61-64 NIV)

As well as these explicit references to deity, there are more indirect references, particularly when Jesus refers to Himself as the Son of Man. This title which on the surface indicated humanity caused controversy when it was used in the context of God’s prerogatives. In these sayings, Jesus is claiming divine authority to forgive sins, act as judge of human actions and even determine what God requires on the Sabbath day.

But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins

(Matthew 9:6 NIV)

For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

(Matthew 16:27 NIV)

So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath

(Mark 2:28 NIV)

No Jew would ever have had the audacity to make such statements. Even today, those statements are considered as outrageously blasphemous to orthodox Jews as they were to the religious leaders of the time - hence the death sentence, when He claimed He would be seated at the right hand of God - the place of highest honour. Jesus was directly referring to Himself as residing in the dwelling place of God. But this is not the only reference Jesus gives as to where He came from and where He was returning to.

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We also saw that before His death Jesus taught His disciples:

I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.”

(John 16:28 NIV)

“I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them

(John 17:13 NIV)

1 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. 2 My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. 4 You know the way to the place where I am going

(John 14:1-4 NIV)

Verses 1-4 of chapter 14 which refer to where Jesus says He is returning is of crucial importance. There is absolutely no point to believing the teaching about the kingdom of heaven if it is a non-existent location which believers will never experience. The ‘Who’ and the ‘Where’ go together. What Jesus taught about His heavenly identity, origins and residence are the basis upon which all other teaching rests. If these are not firmly established at the very beginning, then Jesus’ status as a teacher is relegated to the world’s current view of Him as nothing more than a great ethical teacher.

So, because of what Jesus did teach about His deity, we can go with confidence to the ‘What’ of what He taught about Himself. It is because of Who Jesus is that we can make sense of what Jesus claims to be. Both the ‘Who’ and the ‘What’ are combined in the ‘I am’ sayings recorded for us by John. Each of these sayings is a study in its own right, but they give us further evidence of unique, divine qualifications, for as the saying puts it: “I AM. Two of the most powerful words. For what you put after them shapes your reality.”

- I am the Light of the World
- I am the Bread of Life
- I am the True Vine
- I am the Good Shepherd
- I am the Door of the Sheepfold

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- I am the Way, the Truth and the Life
- I am the Resurrection and the Life

Put in this order we have pictures which open up facets of Jesus personality and mission that inspire confidence in His abilities to deliver all that He promises through His teaching. That we need light to see is stating the obvious. But the implications of Jesus stating He was the light of the world opens up greater shades of meaning. Jesus was the personification of light who had come to enlighten humanity concerning the way of salvation. The dictionary explains enlighten as giving “greater knowledge and understanding about a subject or situation” or giving “spiritual knowledge or insight.” Given Jesus’ deity and His heavenly origins, He alone is capable of giving true enlightenment regarding God’s plans for humanity. Bread of Life also carries different shades of meaning because, although Jesus broke the bread and said it represented His body broken for us, we also have to see that body as the Word become flesh. This means that when Jesus quoted Deuteronomy stating that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, His bodily presence and His words were one and the same thing. Because Jesus practiced what He preached and taught the two cannot be separated, that remains true of each of the other images He uses to explain what His presence and words mean for believers.

That there is a unity of both life and words comes through in the image of the ‘True Vine.’ Jesus words about the unity of the Godhead with all who would believe the gospel message, sealed by obedience to all that Jesus had commanded is captured in this picture. Very significantly, the condition is

John 15:7

If you remain in me and MY WORDS REMAIN IN YOU, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.

We come back to the importance of what Jesus says in both references to the Good Shepherd and being the Gate of the sheepfold.

John 10:2-5 & 7

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice.....Therefore Jesus said again, “I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep..... (John 10:2-5 NIV)

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I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture..... I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father —and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. (John 10:9 & 14-16 NIV)

It is clear from what Jesus claims to be in these images that the words He speaks are the means by which all that His earthly ministry promised is to be brought into being. These pictorial examples of what Jesus is adds to His credentials as a teacher, for they convey His knowledge and understanding of exactly what information is essential to leading us to the ultimate goal of achieving eternal life.

Who Jesus is and what He is reaches an even higher level in the last two ‘I am’ sayings. The “Way” can be related to Jesus being the Good Shepherd who will always lead His flock in the right path. And the Way corresponds to the Gate of the sheepfold that enables the sheep to go in and out and find pasture. In other words, only in and through Jesus can the place of safety and security and proper care be found. There no evil or harm can come to them.

And at the pinnacle of that truth is the fact of the Resurrection. Jesus had not only predicted His death; He predicted that He would rise again from the dead and because He lives, those who believe in Him would have eternal life. That is teaching of the ultimate, truly life changing dynamic - that of moving from death to life, with all the potential for an eternity of new and exciting learning experiences. That may not sound appealing to those whose learning experiences, shall we say, have not exactly encouraged further steps in that direction. But in many ways, our Christian journey is a learning experience. Bible study is part and parcel of it for we are expected to move from the milk to the meat of the word and through it move towards maturity and greater Christlikeness. We can only do that as we get to know Jesus better. We believe Who He is. We believe where He came from and where He has returned to. The examples of the ‘I am’ sayings teach us through familiar concepts what Jesus is in regards to what His earthly mission was planned to accomplish. The sheep who do listen to His voice have a guarantee of that future, for in the hours preceding His death, Jesus told His disciples.

John 10:27:28

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My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.

Looking at the answers to our questions about who Jesus was, where He had come from and was going to, what He was and why He had come; give us enough information to say that we have in Jesus a divinely qualified teacher, endowed with the wisdom of God Himself.

The only question that remains is whether or not we are prepared to accept that teaching in its entirety. The wonderful thing about the teaching of Jesus, however, is that nothing can stand in our way if we provide the willingness to learn from Him. We already know God will respond positively to the words of this hymn if used as a prayer. Alan raised the question of the work of the Holy Spirit and this hymn tells us we will have the His “gracious aid” at our disposal. Being led by “heavenly light” shining on all the circumstances of our lives, there will never be a stigma of inadequacy or failure because we will all be on what is now called a ‘individual learning plan’ tailored to our particular needs. This is what Jesus promises not just for a finite teaching period, but for the whole of our lives and beyond.

Teach me Thy way, O Lord, teach me Thy way!
Thy gracious aid afford, teach me Thy way!
Help me to walk aright, more by faith, less by sight;
Lead me with heavenly light; teach me Thy way.

When doubts and fears arise teach me Thy way!
When storms overspread the skies, teach me Thy way!
Shine through the clouds and rain, through sorrow, toil and pain;
Make Thou my pathway plain; teach me Thy way!

Long as my life shall last, teach me Thy way!
Where'er my lot be cast, teach me Thy way!
Until the race is run, until the journey's done,
Until the crown is won, teach me Thy way!