

Marvel: What Did Jesus Do?

Controversy

John 7:1-24

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“After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill him. Now the Jews’ Feast of Booths was at hand. So his brothers said to him, “Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.” For not even his brothers believed in him. Jesus said to them, “My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil. You go up to the feast. I am not going up to this feast, for my time has not yet fully come.” After saying this, he remained in Galilee. But after his brothers had gone up to the feast, then he also went up, not publicly but in private. The Jews were looking for him at the feast, and saying, “Where is he?” And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, “He is a good man,” others said, “No, he is leading the people astray.” Yet for fear of the Jews no one spoke openly of him. About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began teaching. The Jews therefore marveled, saying, “How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?” So Jesus answered them, “My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. If anyone’s will is to do God’s will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood. Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why do you seek to kill me?” The crowd answered, “You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?” Jesus answered them, “I did one work, and you all marvel at it. Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man’s whole body well? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment”” (John 7:1–24).

As we examine this next chapter in John’s Gospel, I want you to consider two questions:

1. What role does the approval of others play in your decision-making?
2. What do you want people to believe about you?

These two questions are foundational to how we live nearly every day. For example, when you find a book that seems interesting, what is usually the first thing you do? Turn it over. See who has endorsed it. If you are purchasing something online, the customer reviews are really important in your decision-making.

Human beings make decisions based on the opinion of others.

But we also want to manage the perception of others. We are constantly filtering our perception of what people think about us or what we want them to believe—the car we drive, the place we live, the technology we own, the way we talk, walk, and the way we carry ourselves. What people think matters. When you stood before your clothing choices this morning, you made decisions not only related to weather and comfort but to what message you wanted to send. We all do it. And it isn't always bad.

Social media shines a bright spotlight on this issue. Our pics, posts, comments, likes, loves, and retweets are embedded with the good and bad of two things: approval and appearances.

The fuel for much of daily life is what people think of us and what we want them to think of us.

Common Controversy

This gravitational pull is potentially problematic when it comes to considering who Jesus is and what it means to believe in him. The aim of the book of John is to show us what Jesus does and says so that we can believe in him and have life in his name (John 20:31). Everything John records has this goal in mind. From multiple stories, angles, interactions with people, and even through the death and resurrection account, John's aim is to convince you to believe.

He has already shown us a number of barriers or things that we have to turn (repent) from in order for belief in Jesus to be real. John 7:1-24 records a controversy with two groups of people—the brothers of Jesus and the Jews attending a feast. The roots of this controversy are the same, but they are different expressions.

Both groups are guilty of unbelief. One struggles with approval. The other with appearances. Let's look at what John desires to show us here, and then draw some applications. Allow me to show you how Jesus is the answer to our prideful desire for approval and keeping up appearances.

Approval

Verses 1-9 record an interesting conversation between Jesus and his brothers. After Jesus's conception by the Holy Spirit, Mary and Joseph had children. Their names, according to Matthew 13:55-56, were Joseph, Jude, Simon, and James. The last name, James, is especially important. He will eventually become the pastor of the church in Jerusalem and will write the book that bears his name.

According to verse one, Jesus remained in Galilee, the current place where his family was living. He was not inclined to travel to Judea and Jerusalem because his life was in danger (see 5:18).

Verse two says something important. It sets up the controversy between Jesus and his brothers. John mentions the Feast of Booths. There are a number of things you need to know about this festival.

- This was one of three Jewish feasts that brought thousands of people to Jerusalem
- It celebrated the harvest and memorialized the wilderness wanderings by the construction of small booths in which people lived during the week-long festival

- The Feast of Tabernacles or Booths ended with a large gathering on the eighth day with a water-drawing and a lamp-lighting ceremony (see 7:37 and 8:12)

Needless to say, this festival was a major event in the life of the nation.

The brothers of Jesus come to him with an idea: Jesus should travel to Jerusalem and make himself known to the crowds, especially his disciples, so that “they may see the works you are doing.” Then they offer this logic (v. 4): “For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.”

What prompted them to say this? We’ll get to the ultimate reason in a minute, but you could imagine one of the following reasons:¹

- Jesus just lost many of his disciples (6:66); perhaps this was a way to win them back.
- It would be logical and strategic to capitalize on the opportunity in Jerusalem.
- The brothers of Jesus may have been frustrated with Jesus’s inconsistent methodology. He attracts crowds and then sends them away.
- Perhaps it was making their life and family situation difficult. Maybe they wanted him to go “all in” with his ministry.

These brothers are suggesting that in order for Jesus to accomplish his mission, he needs to do something to gain the approval of the masses. They’ve seen the miracles that he is doing. Jesus has power! The crowds follow him. And they know how the world works. Approval and mass appeal are the way you change the world. “Go for it, Jesus!”

Now, if the text stopped there you might think that Jesus’s brothers are on board. But that is not the case—at all!

Whatever the first layer, verse five tells us the ultimate reason: “For not even his brothers believed in him.” According to John, the ultimate problem for the brothers of Jesus was unbelief. They did not believe in him.

So, everything they said about Jesus going to Jerusalem is a fruit of unbelief. Listen to me carefully. There are times when unbelief can hide underneath our pragmatism (“This is how everyone knows it works”), our fear of man (“Will other people approve?”), our fear of risk (“Who else is going?”), and any number of other approval issues. But underneath the issue of approval is the real issue of unbelief.

Jesus responds by telling them about their over-connectedness to the world. He tells them that they are part of the unbelief that characterizes everything about the culture. Jesus says, “My time has not yet come, but your time is always here” (v. 6) Their unbelief causes them not to know the right time or the

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 305.

right way for Jesus to make himself known. Jesus sees the world differently than his disciples. Their unbelief causes them to see the world through the wrong lens.

But Jesus goes deeper. In verse seven, Jesus tells his brothers that the world doesn't hate them. The world hates Jesus because he testifies that "its works are evil." Jesus and his brothers have a very different approach to dealing with the world.

The result of this conversation is that Jesus initially stays back in Galilee as his brothers go to the festival. Jesus says (v. 8), "I am not going up . . . for my time has not yet fully come." In other words, Jesus's life is not driven by an earthly agenda but by a heavenly one. Jesus is not living for the approval of men but for the approval of God.

We'll come back to this at the end, but I need to say two things here. First, if you are not yet a Christian, it's important for you to know that coming to Jesus involves faith in him, which means you stop putting your faith in others or in their approval. There comes a point when the calculating, the polling, and the researching needs to stop. You need to walk away from the approval of others and trust in Jesus.

For those of you who are followers of Jesus, I want to caution you. Even after you put your faith in Christ, the approval of others can begin to rule you. It can take many different forms and other nuanced expressions: "This is how the world works," "Will other people approve?" "Who else is involved?" These are the questions that can easily lead us down the wrong path even after we come to Christ.

One common expression of unbelief is the trap of approval. There's another.

Appearances

The second expression of unbelief is connected to the way the Jews understood the meaning of righteousness. There was a religious system that created an appearance of godliness but missed the mark.

In verses 10-13, we learn that Jesus does, in fact, go to the Feast of Booths. However, he doesn't go up with his brothers. Jesus went to the feast privately. John tells us that Jesus was already creating a stir in the city. People were looking for him. There was a debate regarding whether or not Jesus was a good man or not. Jesus was controversial. But people were not speaking openly about him.

According to verse fourteen, halfway through the feast, Jesus went to the temple and started teaching. Take note here that Jesus did not perform miracles. He taught the people instead. People aren't saved by miracles; they are saved by faith through the hearing of the Word (Rom. 10:17).

What's interesting here is that we don't have an account of exactly what Jesus taught in the temple. John's point in this paragraph is the unbelief on the part of the Jews. They marveled (v. 15) at the authority of Jesus's teaching because "he has never studied." The crowds were stunned because Jesus didn't study in one of the well-known schools. Nor was he a disciple of a famous rabbi.

Where you went to school and who you trained under gave you authority in the eyes of the people. But Jesus breaks that mold. He's more than what he appears.

Then Jesus explains his authority. He says three things:

- 1) v. 16 - Jesus's teaching is derived from his relationship with the Father
- 2) v. 17 - Those who know God's will would know the basis of his teaching
- 3) v. 18 - Unlike proud teachers who establish their own authority, Jesus speaks for the glory of God

The brothers wanted the self-exaltation with approval of the crowds. The Jerusalem crowd wanted the self-exaltation of the appearance of obedience. They didn't like this non-trained teacher from Galilee pressing into the pretense of their religious observance and obedience.

Jesus presses them directly in verse 19: "Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law . . ."

Thousands of Jews were gathered in the Holy City. Countless sacrifices were offered. They were honoring the provision of God during the wilderness wanderings. And yet Jesus took them to task because they were not pursuing true obedience. They attended the festival, but they were not interested in true righteousness.

You can see this, can't you? People keeping up appearances by participating in a festival with their hearts far from God. People gathering in God's presence who are more concerned about being at the right event than about having a right heart. People who are more concerned with what other people think than with what God thinks.

The last time Jesus was in Jerusalem, he healed a man at the Pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath. And in response to the objection of the Jews, Jesus said in John 5:44, "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God" (John 5:44)?

What's the core of their problem of unbelief? Glory from one another.

They used their interpretation of the Old Testament law to make each other feel better about themselves. They developed strict laws beyond the intent of the Scriptures to create the perception of righteousness.

Here's the trap of self-righteousness: You need other people to think you are righteous for it to work. You need people who are "less righteous" for comparison. And you need people who treat you like you are righteous when you know you aren't.

The brothers wanted the crowds for approval. The Jews needed the crowds for appearances.

When Jesus suggests that they are seeking to kill him, they accuse him of having a demon (v. 19b). And then Jesus answers them directly about their response to his last miracle at the pool. Listen to Jesus in his own words:

“Jesus answered them, ‘I did one work, and you all marvel at it. Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man’s whole body well?’” (John 7:21–23)?

They are willing to bring one part of the body into spiritual purity through circumcision. But they are upset that an entire man was healed on the Sabbath. In John 5, they are more concerned that there’s a man carrying a cot on the Sabbath than they are that he was healed. They want to know where Jesus gets his authority rather than believe he really is the Son of God.

They seem to think, “We can’t have people carrying cots on the Sabbath! We need to know where this man is getting his teaching.” And they miss that a man has been healed and that what Jesus said is true!

They are so concerned about the external issues, that they are missing everything! And that is why John ends this paragraph with a stunning statement by Jesus: “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment” (v. 24).

Jesus is controversial because he presses upon the Achilles’ heel of pride. With the brothers, it looked like the fame and approval of the crowd. And with the Jews, it was their passion for appearances.

Applications

Let me apply this directly to those of you who are Christians and then to those of you who are not by giving both of you a warning and pointing you to the wonder of Jesus.

Oh, Christian, be warned here. Be careful when the pragmatism of what “works” by worldly and cultural standards starts to affect your approach to Christianity. Check yourself on how much you are allowing the approval of people who don’t know Jesus to dictate your life. But also be careful that you do not allow some religious system to become the crutch upon which you prop up an image of a religious person. Be mindful that keeping up appearances is exhausting. It doesn’t work, and it drives people away.

Christian, be filled with wonder at how Jesus gives you all the approval you’ll ever need. You don’t need to keep up appearances when you’ve been captured by his grace. Rather than being offended by Jesus’s words “none of you keeps the law,” embrace it. It’s true! But preach the gospel to your heart over and over again. And when you are tempted to fall back into approval or when something challenges your penchant for keeping appearances, embrace the finished work of Jesus. Remember, he has the words of life!

To those of you still on a spiritual journey, let me invite you to consider the implications of what it looks like for you to enter into this passage. Be careful because the enemy loves to keep people trapped outside of Christ because of their fear of what people would think or what it would mean for you to become a follower of Jesus. Coming to faith in Christ means looking to Jesus and finding your approval in him. It means giving up the appearance that you are a perfect person. It means not trusting in the

spiritual experiences or the heritage of the past. And it also means not justifying unbelief because of the shortcomings of other people.

Instead, look to Jesus, who is able to grant you forgiveness, bring wholeness to your soul, and give you the hope you so desperately need. You'll never find the approval you want, nor will you be able to keep up the appearances you think you need.

Our only hope is in Jesus, who is able to cleanse us so we are fully approved before God and change us so that we have a new identity in Christ.

The answer to our prideful desire for approval and keeping up appearances is Jesus.

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