

## **Discernment From Devotion**

We're living in a the great age of disinformation. You may have heard that someone recently used AI to produce a Bible verse which doesn't exist, in which Jesus affirms something condemned in Scripture. The program created a Bible verse that sounded just like it came out of the Gospels, except, of course, that it didn't.

We now talk about fake news, about media outlets that control the narrative. Some ideas are called conspiracy theories, some call the same things alternative truths. Some ideas are called mainstream, others are called fringe. Who do we believe?

It's a time of great confusion for knowing anything. Do you trust books, websites, experts? Which ones? Do you trust only what your eyes can see? But these days, how do you know that what you're seeing hasn't been created by AI? Do you believe only your own intuitions? What if they're wrong? Do you believe only what you think has good reason and good evidence? But what counts as good evidence?

And at the heart of these questions are the ultimate questions. Does God exist? Is there life after death? If religion is true, which one?

As we've seen from the book of John, if God truly did become man, then religious debates are over. Wherever and whenever God became man – that person and that event is the true religion, and not just the true religion, but Truth itself.

But how would we know if Jesus is truly the Messiah, the Son of God, as John claims Jesus is? Fortunately for us, John describes many people who were confused about Christ, who had absorbed false theories. But John also records the words of Jesus diagnosing their problem, exploring and explaining their unbelief. Jesus is the surgeon of the heart, and can show you why humans believe what they do.

We've already seen back in chapter 5 how Jesus listed out 5 lines of evidence that supported His claims, and then showed them that the real problem was their will: they were not willing to come to Him. At the heart of their problem was desire: specifically desire to fit in and please each other and be honoured by each other. In chapter 6, Jesus again dealt with unbelief by showing them that they were superficial. They cared only for temporal food and temporal life. To see Jesus as He is, they needed to want real life – eternal life – by believing, eating, the real Food – the Messiah Jesus. And when they rejected this, Jesus gave them the hard doctrine of God's sovereignty\_ they did not believe, because the Father had not revealed it to them.

Chapter 7 now comes back to the human side of the coin, from those mountain peaks of God's election, we now come back to the valley of human decision, and human attitude. Just like chapter 5 taught us what really drove unbelief, so here in chapter 7, Jesus is going to teach what really drives belief in the truth, and the discernment to see it. In a world of fake news, and don't-believe-your-eyes AI, Jesus is going to teach us how to track the truth, how to discern accurately, judge justly.

We can divide this first portion of John 7 into three movements. There was great confusion over Christ. Second, Jesus explains the cause of the confusion. Third, Jesus explains the cure for the confusion.

### **I. The Great Confusion About Christ**

After these things Jesus walked in Galilee; for He did not want to walk in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill Him. <sup>2</sup> Now the Jews' Feast of Tabernacles was at hand. <sup>3</sup> His brothers therefore said to Him, "Depart from here and go into Judea, that Your disciples also may see the works that You are doing. <sup>4</sup> For no one

does anything in secret while he himself seeks to be known openly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world.”<sup>5</sup> For even His brothers did not believe in Him.

This is about six months after the events of chapter 6. It's late September, October, in year three of Jesus ministry. There are just six months left of His time on Earth.

Jesus is a marked man. Verse 2- The Jews – which you remember in John's Gospel refers to the leaders and rulers, not merely the everyday Jewish people – want to kill Him. The Pharisees and Sadducees want Jesus dead: He is a threat to their authority, their power, and their positions. The real power base of these leaders is down in Jerusalem, in Judea. That is why we might better translate *the Jews* in John's Gospel as the Judeans. So Jesus does not march into the Lion's den and play into their hands, where they have strength of numbers and a kind of tactical advantage. Jesus is on a specific timetable given to Him by His Father. He is not going to be a day early or a day late for His appointments with death. He remains up in Galilee, where His hometown of Nazareth is, and where His home base of Capernaum is.

But three times a year, all Jewish males were required to go up to Jerusalem: for Passover, for Pentecost, and for the Feast of Tabernacles. Now is the Feast of Tabernacles, a seven-day Feast celebrating the autumn harvest time in which Israel would commemorate having lived in tents in the wilderness, by building booths for themselves, and being in them, or under them for more time than in their homes during this week. During the time of Jesus, some other traditions had been added. One was a water ceremony, a priest carried water from the pool of Siloam to the temple, symbolising that when Messiah comes the whole earth will know God ‘as the waters cover the sea.’ (Isaiah 11:9) A second was the temple lighting ceremony: four giant golden lampstands lit in the temple courtyard.

So this presents a dilemma. How does Jesus obey the command to go down to Jerusalem without getting killed? And added to this confusion are the attitude and opinion of physical brothers. These are his half-brothers, sons of Mary and Joseph, born after him.

We read about them in other places, such as Mark 3, where they and Mary thought Jesus was out of His mind, and tried to bring Him home. Then, and all the way up to this moment, they do not yet believe in Him, according to verse 5.

Now they will come to believe in Him. We know that because two of our book of the New Testament were written by his half-brothers: the epistle of James, and the epistle of Jude. But it seems they came to faith only after Jesus rose from the dead, and 1 Corinthians 15 tells us that Jesus appeared to James.

But at this moment, they are part of the confusion about Christ. They know He does miracles, but they haven't put it all together. They seem to challenge Him. If you really are the public, famous, Messiah, then you cannot remain in obscurity. Being in Galilee is like hiding! You must go to the most public place and time of all: Jerusalem, during the Feast! Do miracles there, declare yourself to the world, and let anyone who is following you see who you are!

Unwittingly, Jesus' brothers are really repeating the temptation of Satan: throw yourself off the Temple, let the angels catch you, be publicly declared to be Messiah.

6 Then Jesus said to them, “My time has not yet come, but your time is always ready. 7 The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil. 8 You go up to this feast. I am not yet going up to this feast, for My time has not yet fully come.” 9 When He had said these things to them, He remained in Galilee. 10 But when His brothers had gone up, then He also went up to the feast, not openly, but as it were in secret.

But Jesus tells them they are mistaken. He cannot just come and go at any time, like they do. He is

on the Father's timetable, and His time has not yet come. Jesus means the world as more than just the population, but as the system of rebellion and unbelief. That world hates Jesus, because He has exposed its idols and selfishness, and wants Him dead. I am not going to walk into a death-trap before the time.

After they have gone up, Jesus goes up secretly. Perhaps He was disguised. But by arriving later and not with the crowds, it allowed Him the element of surprise when He goes into the Temple. He probably also avoided the crowds hailing Him, and perhaps a premature Triumphal Entry – which is exactly what is going to happen the next Passover.

Jesus wasn't wrong. They were indeed looking for him.

<sup>11</sup> Then the Jews sought Him at the feast, and said, "Where is He?" <sup>12</sup> And there was much complaining among the people concerning Him. Some said, "He is good"; others said, "No, on the contrary, He deceives the people." <sup>13</sup> However, no one spoke openly of Him for fear of the Jews. <sup>14</sup> Now about the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught. <sup>15</sup> And the Jews marveled, saying, "How does this Man know letters, having never studied?"

The Judeans, the Jewish rulers were hunting for Him. In the Greek, it is literally, where is that one? But apart from the Judeans, there is now a crowd of Jewish people in Jerusalem, and the confusion about Jesus is rife. Everyone is discussing him, but not openly. The word for complaining means "behind the scenes talk". The crowds already know that the religious rulers are against Jesus, so speaking about Jesus openly is opening yourself up to trouble. Jesus is a banned topic. When they do talk about Him, they are confused. Some say, "He's a good man". Others say, "No, he's a deceiver". Those two attitudes are still the consensus among many today.

And as we'll see next time, the crowd even has some folk theology myths about Messiah floating in their heads: that the Prophet is different to Messiah, that Messiah appears and no one knows His origin. Some think that because Jesus comes from Galilee that He was born there, and they don't know He was born in Bethlehem. Plenty of confusion.

So about the middle of the Feast, Jesus goes up the Temple. The Temple complex was a huge area, including several porticos where rabbis could and would teach. Jesus uses the element of surprise to teach the crowds.

Apparently some of the Jews had never actually heard Jesus teach. Jesus did most of His teaching up in Galilee, and when He was in Jerusalem, He'd only done miracles. The teaching surprises the leaders, because it is learned and powerful. When they say "how does He know letters?" they are not referring to being literate (as most Jewish men were), they are referring to the ability to teach, reason, explain, an discourse like a learned rabbi. The teaching of the day included rabbis quoting other rabbis. But as one said, the rabbis taught from authorities, but Jesus taught with authority. They quoted each other; Jesus could speak directly about everything, being the very Truth Himself.

Everyone's confused: the brothers, the crowd, the Judeans. Jesus is now going to explain why they are confused.

## II. The Great Cause of the Confusion

<sup>16</sup> Jesus answered them and said, "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me. <sup>17</sup> If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or *whether* I speak on My own *authority*. <sup>18</sup> He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who seeks the glory of the One who sent Him is true, and no unrighteousness is in Him.

<sup>19</sup> Did not Moses give you the law, yet none of you keeps the law? Why do you seek to kill Me?" <sup>20</sup> The people answered and said, "You have a demon. Who is seeking to kill You?" <sup>21</sup> Jesus answered and said to them, "I did one work, and you all marvel. <sup>22</sup> Moses therefore gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. <sup>23</sup> If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath, so that the law of Moses should not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath? <sup>24</sup> Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment." (John 7:1–24)

The cure for this confusion is in verse 16 to 18, but the cause of the confusion is in the verses after that, verses 19- 24. We'll come back to the earlier verses, but look at verse 19 and following. After explaining where real discernment comes from, in verse 19 Jesus tells them why they can't discern properly.

He says, you claim adherence to the truths and words of Moses, but you don't obey them. You're plotting to murder me. Murder is certainly a breaking of the Law, so there is hypocrisy at work here. People claiming loyalty to the truth of the Law, but disobeying the Law.

To this charge, some in the crowd who either don't know about the plot to kill Jesus, or are lying and pretending they don't know, say, "You're mad! You're demon-possessed with some kind of persecution complex!"

Jesus ignores the insult, because He knows they are trying to kill Him. He refers them back to what He did several months earlier in Jerusalem, when He healed the lame man by the Pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath. The Jewish leaders were furious at Him for healing on the Sabbath, and disqualified Him from being Messiah.

Jesus now shows them how disobedient they are. In the Law of Moses, male children had to be circumcised eight days after birth. If they had been born eight days before Sabbath, the rabbis decided that circumcision was more important than Sabbath, and allowed it to take place on the Sabbath. The Law allowed Sabbath-circumcision for a host of good reasons, and did not call for it to be postponed by even one day. Now if that was true for circumcision, how much more should it apply to healing a lame man.

What's the point? They are inconsistently applying the Law, discerning badly, judging wrongly, because they are judging superficially, only by appearances. Verse 24, they are dishonest. Verse 19 sums it up: <sup>19</sup> Did not Moses give you the law, yet none of you keeps the law?

Point: you are disobedient, that's why you don't discern with righteous judgement. Getting it wrong in your mind starts with getting it wrong in your actions. Wrong thinking comes from wrong living. False beliefs come from false behaviour.

What the Bible describes as the hardness of heart that prevents belief is not an intellectual slowness, or a lack of mental aptitude. Hardness of heart is a chosen stubbornness, a refusal to submit, an attitude of selfishness. By contrast, Jesus talks about having the heart of a little child to understand the mysteries of the kingdom.

The brothers, the crowds, the Jews are confused about Jesus because they are disobedient to the truth they already have. All this leads to Jesus unlocking the answer for us.

### III. The Great Cure for Confusion

<sup>16</sup> Jesus answered them and said, "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me. <sup>17</sup> If anyone wills to do His

will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or *whether* I speak on My own *authority*.<sup>18</sup> He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who seeks the glory of the One who sent Him is true, and no unrighteousness is in Him.

When the Judeans wanted to know where Jesus had got His teaching from, He answered: my teaching is Heaven-Sent, like me. Had He said that He was self-taught, or that He needed no teacher, He would have been discredited immediately. But He makes sure to say that He is not seeking His own fame or glory. A self-seeking teacher is not reliable.

This was an age where you always cited some rabbinic authority for every statement you made. Here Jesus is making all these statements, but He is not citing a single rabbi. But Jesus doesn't claim to be the source of His message. He says it is truth from God. He says I seek the glory of my Father, which means my message is true. So how then does this confused crowd verify *that*?

Now verse 17 is the key verse. Jesus says, if you want to know if what I am saying is truly from God the Father, or whether I'm just coming up with it myself, here is how you will know: ***if you will to do His will.***

If you desire to perform God's desires, if you desire to please God, then you will know whether I am from God, or whether I am an impostor.

Now that is not what we were expecting, right? We think, if you want to know something, then you do more research, you study harder, you investigate more. If you want to know something, then you need higher quality information, better facts, more evidence, sounder reasons. We figure it is a mental process we are after. Jesus tells us, no, it is a moral process. He tells us this kind of knowledge, discernment comes to the one who chooses to please God.

He tells us that insight, explanation, understanding, comes through an action, or at least an attitude leading to action. Obedience leads to discernment. Explanation comes through submission. Now of course, knowledge also leads to obedience, but the Bible teaches us in many places that it is after we have committed to obeying God that we will receive more understanding.

The humble He guides in justice, And the humble He teaches His way. (Psalm 25:9)

The secret of the LORD *is* with those who fear Him, And He will show them His covenant. (Psalm 25:14)

The fear of the LORD *is* the beginning of knowledge, *But* fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7)

These verses tell us that the order of knowledge is obey, and then know. Do God's will and you shall understand God's truth. A. W. Tozer: "The willing and the doing (or at least the willingness to do) come before the knowing. Truth is a strict master and demands obedience before it will unveil its riches to the seeking soul."

Having a well-educated mind, being advanced in learning is no guarantee of being wise or discerning. Some of history's greatest criminals and villains have been highly intelligent and highly educated. Satan also offers knowledge, but knowledge through disobedience, like he offered Adam and Eve.

But Jesus offers knowledge "as the result of obedience: first the yoke of responsibility, then the joy of knowing God's truth. Dr. G. Campbell Morgan said it perfectly: "When men are wholly, completely consecrated to the will of God and want to do that above everything else, then they find

out that Christ's teaching is divine, that it is the teaching of God.<sup>17</sup>

Why is this the case? Because the knowledge we need is not all factual, conceptual knowledge. It is knowledge gained in a relationship of trust, like an apprentice learning a trade. "If any man will know the will of Christ, let him do that will. When a young man is put to learn a trade, he does so by working at it; and we learn the truth which our Lord teaches by obeying His commands... Holiness is the royal road to Scriptural knowledge. We know as much as we do." (C. H. Spurgeon.

Obedience leads to truth. We experience this in every-day life. For example, when people take up responsibility, they always learn and understand more. When you move positions, your perspective changes. As an employee, you have all sorts of complaints and questions and doubts about the business and about your manager. Then you are promoted into a more senior position, and suddenly so much more makes sense. You submitted to take on more responsibility, and more things made sense.

The same happens when a church member becomes a church leader. From that obedience comes explanation. When a child grows up and one day becomes a parent, in the taking on of responsibility comes all sorts of understanding that was not there when a child. Take on spiritual responsibility, and from that maturity comes more insight. <sup>14</sup> But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (Hebrews 5:14)

The solid food of deep doctrine is only for those who have practiced using their senses to discern between good and evil. They've practised obeying, and that's why they are now mentally and spiritually ready for more advanced truth.

Your stance affects your knowledge. Your heart attitude affects your discernment. Which way you are pointed in your heart is the rudder that directs the rest of you. It is like the nose of a dog. When we first got a dog, she was totally out of control on walks. Someone told us to get a leash that fits around the nose. It is not a muzzle, but it looks like one. All it does is move the nose of the dog in the right direction, and the dog follows its nose. In the same way, whichever way your heart and desires are pointed, the rest of you follows, including your mind. Point your heart towards obeying God, and the mind and the understanding and the discernment follows.

So sometimes you find Christians stuck in a rut of stagnation. It's as if they feel they've learned all there is to learn, and they're bored with it all. They're like the rich young ruler, "All this I've kept from my youth! What do I still lack?"

The problem is not that they've learned all there is to learn. The problem is they've become dull and hard to the truth they already have by a slack and careless attitude towards obedience. And many of these Christians try to address their boredom with the truth by dressing up the truth. So they try to find some new podcast, with some new exciting voice, with some new exciting take on the truth, or some new angle. Some go hunting for ever more esoteric, ever more esoteric doctrines, ever more obscure, arcane, weird teachings, because of their boredom with basic truth. Others try a new Bible version, or a new app, or a new church. But the hunt will go ever on, because what they are experiencing is a dullness that is not caused by the kind of information they are getting, or even by the way that information is coming at them.

Let that same person change their attitude towards doing God's will. Let that person become fascinated with pleasing God in every area of life. Let the person decide, I am going to become

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<sup>1</sup> Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [\*The Bible exposition commentary\*](#) (Vol. 1, p. 316). Victor Books.

practical and detailed, trying to please God in measurable practical ways. Maybe for one month, I will choose the top 3 area I've been convicted in, or 2 spiritual habits I want to master, or four Proverbs I want to obey. Stop talking about vaguely obeying God and get as practical as disciplines, routines, actions, things to stop, things to start. That person suddenly feels like all the truth is fresh. That person suddenly appreciates old truths in new ways. That person now sees insights into truths formerly taken for granted. That person feels like a whole world is opening up. It feels like revival, like awakening.

What happened? Not a mental event -a moral event. The person desired to do God's will. The person chose to change the posture towards authority, combined it with specific disciplines, and John 7:17 came true in their life. By desiring to please God, the Christian grew in discernment, knowledge, understanding.

This is how you get verse 24: righteous judgement. This is how you can make it in a world of fake news, conspiracy theories, urban legends, biased media, manipulative advertising, political propaganda, false teachings, and erroneous doctrine.

Yes, you must study. Yes, you must choose your sources carefully. Yes, you must grow your powers of discernment. Yes, God must sovereignly draw you, teach, and open your eyes. But here we have perhaps the deepest root of true human knowledge. If you want to know truth, you must be rightly oriented to the Truth-Giver Himself. If you want to know, you must desire to please the Giver of All knowledge.