

## **DO NOT HARBOR PREJUDICE AGAINST CHRIST**

*5 <sup>31</sup>If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid. <sup>32</sup>There is someone else who testifies about me; and I know that his testimony about me is valid. <sup>33</sup>You have sent to John, and he has testified to the truth. <sup>34</sup>But the testimony I receive is not from a man; however, I say these things so that you may be saved. <sup>35</sup>[John] was the lamp that burns and shines; and for a little while you were willing to rejoice in his light. <sup>36</sup>But the testimony that I possess is greater than [the testimony of] John; for the works that the Father has given me to perform—the very works that I am doing—testify about me, [testifying] that the Father has sent me. <sup>37</sup>And the Father who sent me has testified about me himself. You have neither heard his voice nor seen his form at any time. <sup>38</sup>Furthermore, you do not have his word [living] in you; for you do not believe the one whom he sent. <sup>39</sup>You study the Scriptures diligently, because you think that eternal life is [found] in them. Now these are the ones that testify about me; <sup>40</sup>but you will not come to me so that you may receive life. <sup>41</sup>I do not accept glory from men. <sup>42</sup>But I know you, that you do not have a love for God within you. <sup>43</sup>I have come in my Father's name and you do not accept me; if someone shall come in his own name, you will accept him. <sup>44</sup>How can you believe, you who accept glory from one another, but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? <sup>45</sup>Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father. [However,] there is someone who does accuse you, [namely,] Moses, [the very one] on whom you have set your hope; <sup>46</sup>for if you believed Moses, you would believe me, because he wrote about me. <sup>47</sup>But if you do not believe his writings, how can you believe my words? (Jn. 5:31-47)*

### **Introduction**

The dictionary defines prejudice as being “an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or against their supposed characteristics.”

Marion experienced prejudice first hand when she was growing up. Her father was a Jew, and even though she was being raised in the Christian faith by her mother, her last name branded her as far as her peers were concerned. To her peers she was part of the town's minority who were different, and thus inferior.

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Even though Marion herself had experienced prejudice as a child, she admits that on one occasion she found herself practicing prejudice. People with swarthy complexions who spoke a different language moved into her neighborhood. As far as Marion could tell, no one in the entire household seemed to be working. Marion kept her distance from that family, until one day they solicited her help. It was then that Marion learned of the husband's disability, which prevented him from doing what he wanted to do most: provide for his family (*POWER*, 2/1/87, pp. 4-6.)

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The greatest prejudice in the world is that which self-righteous people—people who view themselves as being acceptable to God because of the good works they have done—hold against the Lord Jesus Christ. We find an example of such spiritual prejudice in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John.

If we are prejudiced against the Lord Jesus Christ, we will cut ourselves off from His presence and from the spiritual life He offers.

### **I. Do Not Harbor Prejudice against Christ, in Spite of the Evidence**

Jesus has come to Jerusalem on the occasion of a great Jewish feast, and He has performed a great miracle of healing—and has done so on the Sabbath. The Jews respond to this miracle by labeling Jesus as a Sabbath-breaker: *“Because he did these things on the Sabbath, this is why the Jews persecuted Jesus”* (vs. 16.) Jesus defends His actions by declaring that He observes His heavenly Father and does whatever He sees His Father doing: *“Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is working even until now, and so I am working’”* (vs. 17.) We then read in verse 18, *“For this reason the Jews tried even harder to kill him; not only because he broke the Sabbath, but also [because] he called God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”*

Now in John 5:31-40 Jesus supplies the evidence to support His claim that He is the Son of God, the promised Savior—He calls forth His witnesses. First, there is the witness of John the Baptist (vs. 33-35.) John the Baptist was a man sent by God (Jn. 1:6-7), a man whose ministry was anointed with the Holy Spirit, as we learn from Luke 1:15b, *“he shall be great in the sight of the LORD ... and he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.”* As such, John carried on a bright and powerful ministry throughout Israel; it was a time of revival. Religion, and the coming of the long-expected Messiah, became the topic of concern to everyone; multitudes flocked to hear John’s preaching and submitted to the baptism he performed. Indeed, the Jewish leaders were compelled to send out a delegation to John to inquire about his identity and his mission. John testified that God had sent him to prepare the way for the Messiah (the Christ), and he pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God:

*Now this was John’s testimony when the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to him to ask him, Who are you? <sup>20</sup>He admitted and did not deny; indeed, he admitted, I am not the Christ. <sup>21</sup>So they asked him, What then? Are you Elijah? And he replied, I am not. Are you the Prophet? And he answered, No. <sup>22</sup>Therefore they said to him, Who are you? [Tell us,] so that we may give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself? <sup>23</sup>He said, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make the way straight for the LORD, just as Isaiah the prophet foretold ... <sup>29</sup>The next day [John] saw Jesus*

*coming toward him and said, Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!* (Jn. 1:19-23,29)

Second, the works that Jesus performed bore witness to Him (vs. 36.) John came, accomplished his ministry, then passed from the scene, (being imprisoned by King Herod.) But Jesus declares that He has in His possession a witness that is greater than John. He is referring to the works that His Father has given Him to perform, these very works bear witness that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior. As Jesus will say to the Jews on a later occasion, *“Believe me [when I tell you] that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me because of the works [that I have done]”* (Jn. 14:11.)

Third, God the Father bears witness to Jesus by means of the Scriptures (vs. 37a, 39.) Jesus informs the Jews that God the Father Himself has testified about Him to them. Jesus grants that the Jews have never physically heard the Father’s voice nor seen His form; yet, nevertheless, the Father has testified about Jesus to the Jews. The Father has done so by means of the Scriptures: the Scriptures are the very Word of God by which He reveals His Son, the promised Messiah, and describes His life and work—all of which find their fulfillment in the Person and work of Jesus Christ:

*And [Jesus] said to them, O men who are foolish and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! <sup>26</sup>Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and [then] to enter into his glory? <sup>27</sup>And beginning from Moses and from all the Prophets, he explained to them the things in all the Scriptures concerning himself.* (Lk. 24:25-27)

Is Jesus who He claims to be? Is He the Son of God? Is He the divine Savior? The evidence is sufficient, as Lee Strobel, a cynical newspaper reporter came to discover for himself:

At the age of 28 ... Lee was happily married to Leslie, his high school sweetheart, and his journalistic career was soaring. But he and Leslie never talked about God.

“We were successful, socially climbing, striving young people in an exciting profession in a major market,” Lee recalls. “Faith was a non-issue with us. It just never came up.”

All that changed when a woman in their condo complex befriended Leslie and talked to her about Christ. Leslie began attending church and committed her life to the LORD in late 1979.

When Leslie told Lee of her decision, he was polite, but condescending. “I thought it was kind of cute,” he says. “It seemed harmless, but definitely not for me.” But the changes in Leslie were unmistakable. “It was like watching a

rose open up,” Lee says. “It’s very pretty as a bud, but when it blossoms, it’s beautiful. I always thought Leslie was a fantastic person, but I began to see her bloom.”

As he watched her grow in contentment, confidence, and patience, he pondered the cause. ... The first Sunday Lee attended church, the pastor spoke on grace ... It was the first time he remembers hearing the Gospel explained clearly, in a way that made sense. Lee ... left, determined to use his legal and journalistic training to investigate Christianity. *I make my living checking things out, he told himself, so that’s what I’ll do with this.*

For nearly two years, he read books, and the four Gospels, while asking questions and frequently attending services at Leslie’s church. “I was convinced,” he says, “that if I could look at historical evidence concerning Christ, I would probably be able to find out He was a nice guy and a wonderful, charismatic person, but certainly not God.”

The deeper he delved, the more it took on the characteristics of a mystery to be solved. When he encountered a fact or an historical claim, he applied the legal test for evidence. “I looked at the question of eye-witnesses,” Lee says. “I examined archaeology, early non-Christian historians, and the fulfillment of prophecy. As a journalist, I found it fascinating, and every new bit of evidence was like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle. It was the biggest story I’d ever been on, and I’d done some big stories.”

Besides investigating written sources, Lee snooped around the church, looking for a scandal or a hint of impropriety. “I couldn’t find any sign of deceit or anything other than a sincere desire on their part to communicate this message to people. If I had, it would have significantly poisoned my attitude toward the Christian faith. It might have slowed or even stopped my investigation.”

Finally the jigsaw puzzle began to emerge as a portrait of Jesus Christ. “Based on what I had learned and what I had seen,” Lee states, “I felt I had no other choice but to bow to Him as my Forgiver, my Leader, and my Friend.”

When he told Leslie of his decision, she burst into tears, telling him how she had been praying ... for him, that God would remove his callous, hardened heart of stone and give him a new heart, tender toward the LORD.

“Doubting Thomas would have made a great journalist because of his skepticism,” Lee concludes. “But he and I finally had the same reaction when we came to Jesus and said, *‘My Lord and my God.’*” (*POWER*, 6/23/91, pp. 2-ff.)

Do not harbor prejudice against Christ, in spite of the evidence—as did many of the Jews of Jesus’ day.

## II. Do Not Harbor Prejudice against Christ, because Your Heart is Not Right with God

Jesus has just declared that God the Father bears witness to Him by means of the Scriptures; but, He goes on to say, *“you do not have his word [living] in you; for you do not believe the one whom he sent”* (vs. 38.) God had spoken His Word to the Jews; but the Word of God was not a living, active force in their lives. In practical terms, it was little more to them than ink on paper; it was not a living testimony bearing witness of Christ to them. If there is a true reception of the Scriptures as the Word of God, there will also be a true reception of Jesus Christ—because He is the Word of God in the flesh, the living Person to whom the written Word bears testimony.

In verse 42 Jesus confronts His hearers with the charge, *“you do not have a love for God within you.”* That is to say, their life and their religion were not motivated by that sacred love for God that is the very essence of true religion, the kind of love Jesus describes in Matthew 22:37-38, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup>This is the first and greatest commandment.”*

Christ now proceeds to present the evidence of this lack of devotion to God on the part of these people: *“I have come in my Father’s name and you do not accept me”* (vs. 43a.) If you really loved God, you would accept and embrace the One whom He sent; you would recognize Jesus Christ to be the incarnate object of your love and respond to Him accordingly. If the love for God is paramount in your life, then Jesus Christ will be paramount in your life.

The Lord Jesus goes on to say, *“if someone shall come in his own name, you will accept him”* (vs. 43b.) Jesus, the Son of God, has come in His Father’s name—in His Father’s authority—but He is rejected. If a mere teacher comes along in his own name—on his own authority—him they would receive; his teaching would be accepted, his teaching would be applied to their lives with devotion, he himself would be held in honor.

Jesus then exclaims, *“How can you believe, [you] who accept glory from one another, but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?”* (vs. 44.) Jesus is emphatically asserting that it is impossible for a man who is pre-occupied with the praises of men—and unconcerned about receiving the praise that comes from God—to commit his life to Christ. Christ and the world are diametrically opposed: to follow Christ means not only to forfeit the love offered by the world, but also to incur the world’s hatred, as He will later warn His disciples, *“If you [still] belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but because you do not belong to the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates*

*you*" (Jn. 15:19.) Each one of us must choose: Will I live for the praise of men, or for the praise that comes from God? Will I seek to please men, or will I seek to please God?

What a contrast there is between religious men who are godless, and godly men who practice their religion. The former practice their religion in an effort to impress both men and God, but especially men:

*But when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, so **that they may be seen by men**. I tell you the truth, They have received their reward ... <sup>16</sup>Furthermore, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, having a sad expression; they disfigure their faces so that men may see that they are fasting. I tell you the truth, They have received their reward. (Matt. 6:5,16)*

The latter practice their religion solely to please God and to receive the praise that comes from Him:

*A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is [true] circumcision merely outward and physical. <sup>29</sup>On the contrary, a man is [truly] a Jew who is one inwardly; and [true] circumcision is [circumcision] of the heart, [performed] by the [Holy] Spirit, not [merely done in accordance] with the letter [of the law]; **his praise does not come from men, but from God**. (Rom. 2:28-29)*

Do not harbor prejudice against Christ, because your heart is not right with God. Note again the response of Lee Strobel's wife, Leslie, when Lee told her of his conversion to Christ:

... she burst into tears, telling him how she had been praying Ezekiel 36:26 for him, that God would remove his callous, hardened heart of stone and give him a new heart, tender toward the LORD.

In Ezekiel 36:26 the LORD says, *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."*

### **III. Do Not Harbor Prejudice against Christ, in Favor of Holding a Legalistic Religion**

When the Jews beheld the miracle performed by Jesus, they did not see a display of the mercy of God; on the contrary, they viewed Jesus as a Sabbath-breaker: *"Because he did these things on the Sabbath, this is why the Jews persecuted Jesus"* (vs. 16.) They completely failed to appreciate the fact that this paralytic man has been healed, that God has bestowed an act of mercy upon him.

They are totally pre-occupied with the fact that this man—by carrying his mat—is doing something “unlawful” on the Sabbath. Their charge apparently stemmed from such an Old Testament passage as Jeremiah 17:21-22,

*This is what Jehovah says, Be careful not to carry any load on the Sabbath day or bring it through the gates of Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup>Neither carry any load out of your houses nor do any work on the Sabbath day; but sanctify the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers. (Jer. 17:21-22)*

But their application of such Old Testament passages became extremely legalistic and contrary to God’s original intention. Such passages as Jeremiah 17:21-22 refer to labor that should have been done prior to the Sabbath, note Nehemiah 13:19-21,

*When evening shadows fell on the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I ordered the doors to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. I stationed some of my own men at the gates so that no load could be brought in on the Sabbath day. <sup>20</sup>Once or twice the merchants and sellers of all kinds of goods spent the night outside Jerusalem. <sup>21</sup>But I warned them and said, Why do you spend the night by the wall? If you do this again, I will lay hands on you. From that time on they no longer came on the Sabbath. (Neh. 13:19-21)*

The laws concerning Sabbath observance were not intended to forbid a poor invalid from picking up the mat that had been his bed for 38 years, and by so doing demonstrating the healing power and the mercy of God.

What had happened to the Jews’ religion? The Jews had come to view the Scriptures as a religious code of ethics sent down from God, a code of ethics by which one might seek to earn his way into God’s favor. They failed to see that the Scriptures, by revealing the righteousness of God, are confronting us with our inability to earn God’s favor and with our desperate need for the Savior whom God in His great mercy had promised—the divine Savior who alone could supply the righteousness to satisfy the just demands of the law and who, by His atoning death, alone could pay the just penalty demanded by the law.

Furthermore, in order to make the holy demands of God “manageable,” they tended to focus on external acts, as opposed to internal attitudes, something for which the Lord Jesus will rebuke them:

*You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, You shall not murder; and whoever does commit murder shall be liable to judgment. <sup>22</sup>But I tell you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment ... <sup>27</sup>You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery. <sup>28</sup>But I tell you that every one who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt. 5:21-22,27-28)*

What is more, they tended to shrink those acts down to religious rules, as opposed to acknowledging and complying with the broad moral demands of the law. Again, Jesus will rebuke them on this count also:

*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You tithe mint and dill and cummin, but you have neglected the weightier matters of the law—justice, and mercy, and integrity. You should have done these things, and not have neglected the other things. (Matt. 23:23)*

Why is Jesus so offensive to such people? Jesus, by His life as the holy Son of God, and by His teaching, is constantly confronting us with the true dimensions of God's law: in all of its breadth—broad moral principles as well as narrow regulations (note again Matthew 23:23)—and all of its depth—addressing the attitudes of our hearts as well as the actions of our lives (note again Matthew 5:21-22,27-28.) Jesus, by His identity as the Lamb of God, is constantly confronting us with our need for a Savior: we cannot save ourselves, no matter how hard we may try; each one of us needs to have Christ pay for our sins and deliver us from them.

Do not harbor prejudice against Christ, in favor of a legalistic religion.

## **Conclusion**

The greatest prejudice in the world is the prejudice that self-righteous people harbor against Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only Savior. If we harbor such prejudice against Jesus, we will not receive Him and we will cut ourselves off from the spiritual life only He can give.