

John 8:12-20

Limits of the Text

In 7:37, Jesus began publically teaching in Jerusalem on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles. Public opinion about him was divided, but the chief priests and the Pharisees were against him. The next day he returned to the temple and began teaching again. The scribes and the Pharisees interrupted and brought before him the woman caught in adultery (8:1-11). After Jesus let her go, he resumed teaching.¹ As he began by saying, “I am the Light of the world,” this teaching is known as the light of the world discourse (8:12-59). This discourse has multiple teaching sections. The first two, 8:12-20 and 8:21-30, are marked with an “again,” signifying that they continued his teaching from the day before.

Interpretation

“A major feature of the Feast of Tabernacles was the lighting of giant lamps in the women’s court in the temple...The light illuminated the temple area and the people gathered to sing praises and dance. The light reminded the Jewish people of how God was with them in their wanderings in the wilderness in a pillar of cloud which turned to fire at night.”²

12 Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.”³

Jesus began to teach the people again, using an object lesson from the lights around them. He said, “I am the Light of world.” This is a theologically rich statement drawn from the Old Testament. God was the pillar of fire that saved the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt by leading them through the wilderness to the Promised Land (Ex 13:22). Many other passages refer back to this event. For example, David wrote, “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” (Ps 27:1), and the sons of Korah wrote, “For by their own sword they did not possess the land, and their own arm did not save them, but Your right hand and Your arm and the light of Your presence, for You favored them” (Ps 44:3). Even God’s revealed word is described as “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105).

¹ Some manuscripts do not have the story of the woman; if this is not authentic, then the timing of Jesus’ teaching would simply be one day before.

² Walvoord, 2:303.

³ All quotes are NASB95 unless stated otherwise.

When Jesus said, “I am the Light of the world,” while at the Feast of Tabernacles, the people could hardly miss his point. He was claiming to be equal with God. The syntax of the statement is emphatic because of the double pronouns (ἐγὼ εἰμι), and the “I am” format is identified with God’s statement to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex 3:14). The statement itself equated Jesus with the pillar of fire. “To anyone familiar with the exodus story and the celebration of Tabernacles, Jesus was identifying himself clearly with the God who gave Israel this Feast of Tabernacles.”⁴ More than just claiming to be God, he was claiming that he could take people from their sins and unerringly guide them to salvation. This was not the only occasion that Jesus spoke of himself as light. Before healing the man born blind, he said, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (9:5, HCSB). Just before the Lord’s Supper he said, “I have come as a light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in darkness” (12:46, NET). In the prologue, John said of Jesus, “In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men” (1:4). Though the book of John was written primarily to Jewish people, Jesus’ claim to be light would have been universally understood. “The theme of light was an international symbol/description for the basic reality of the good god.”⁵

Jesus’ statement was also an invitation. He invited the world to follow him, just like the Israelites followed the pillar of fire. Following Jesus is synonymous with believing in Jesus. In 12:36, Jesus said, “While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light.” The participle in 8:12 is in the present tense and could be translated as “those who are following.” He was calling people to be following him and to be believing in him. “Jesus is speaking of wholehearted discipleship, not of casual adherence.”⁶ This is the message of the gospel.

There is a consequence for those who choose to follow this Light, one stated both negatively and positively. The negative side is that those who follow Jesus will not walk in darkness. To walk in darkness is to live a life of constant sin. In 3:19, Jesus said, “Men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.” To walk in the light is to receive forgiveness and live a life of obedience. In his first letter, John wrote, “If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn 1:6-7). Those who are following the Light do not live a lifestyle of constant sin.

The positive side is that they will have the Light of life. In the physical world, light gives life to plants and animals and thus people. In the spiritual world, the Light gives spiritual life to those who believe. Light is the supernatural enablement to be saved and

⁴ Borchert, 296.

⁵ Borchert, 296.

⁶ Morris, 389.

to live saved; it is the power of the Holy Spirit to obey God and live righteously. Those who are following the Light obey his commandments and walk in the manner that he walked (1 Jn 2:3, 6). There is no room here to claim Jesus as Savior while rejecting him as Lord.

13 So the Pharisees said to Him, “You are testifying about Yourself; Your testimony is not true.”

In chapter 7, the focus was on the response of the crowds. In chapter 8, the focus is on the response of the Pharisees. Some of the people thought he was the Messiah, but the Pharisees did not. They sent the temple police to arrest him, and when one of their own pleaded for a fair hearing, they would not listen (7:50-52). Their response to his public teaching revealed their hostility towards and rejection of Jesus. This text is one in a series of escalating conflicts with the Pharisees that are highlighted throughout chapters 5-12.⁷

The Pharisees did not believe that Jesus was the Light of the world, but they did not attempt to contradict his teaching directly. In order to discredit him, they raised a legal technicality: Self-testimony is not valid.⁸ To testify is to confirm or attest to something on the basis of personal knowledge or belief.⁹ When Jesus asserted that he was the Light of the world, he gave a testimony about himself. The Pharisees rejected his testimony based upon a requirement of the Law, which stated that a testimony required at least two witnesses (Dt 17:6, 19:15). This was a requirement that Jesus himself had earlier acknowledged (5:31). If the testimony was invalid, then the people should not accept it.

14 Jesus answered and said to them, “Even if I testify about Myself, My testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from or where I am going.

Jesus responded to their technicality in two ways. In his first response, he asserted that his testimony was valid. He knew that his testimony was not the only testimony, but for the sake of argument he momentarily allowed that he was the only testimony. If that were true, his testimony would still be legitimate because he was the only one present with the facts necessary to make a valid judgment. Jesus knew he came from heaven, but they did not. Jesus knew he was going to die on a cross to save people from their sins, but they did not. He was God the Savior, and thus he was the only one who knew the absolute truth of his claim to be the Light of the world.

⁷ Kostenberger, 250.

⁸ Morris, 390.

⁹ Arndt, 617.

15 “You judge according to the flesh; I am not judging anyone. 16 “But even if I do judge, My judgment is true; for I am not alone in it, but I and the Father who sent Me.

The Pharisees’ legal technicality did not really hide their rejection of him; Jesus knew that they did not believe him because of the way they had judged him. They judged humanly; they only saw a man, thus they did not believe he could be the Light who saves people.

Jesus used a pun to differentiate himself from them. He might have said it this way, “Although I judge, I’m not here to judge.” In one sense, Jesus did not come to judge the world; his mission was to save the world. He told Nicodemus, “God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him” (3:17). He would later say, “If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world” (12:47). But in another sense, Jesus had God’s full authority to judge. He could judge who believed in him and who did not (5:22-27). He could judge those who were able to see and those who were blind (9:39). When Jesus made such a judgment it would be a true judgment, because he always judged in complete harmony with the Father.

What’s Jesus’ point in these two verses? He was the Light of the world. He knew exactly who was following him (those disciples who believed) and who was not (the Pharisees).

17 “Even in your law it has been written that the testimony of two men is true. 18 “I am He who testifies about Myself, and the Father who sent Me testifies about Me.”

In his second response, Jesus asserted that there were two witnesses about himself. Though he did not have to, Jesus played along with their legal technicality. “Your law” is a reference to the Mosaic Law, and this law required two men in order to have a valid testimony. Jesus had more; he had the testimony of the Father and the Son. Jesus testified about himself, and he’s already proven how his testimony is legitimate (8:14). And God the Father testified about him. This is not the first time he’s made this argument. In 5:31-47 he said that John the Baptist, his own deeds, the Father, and Scripture testified about him. The Pharisees had not accepted it before, and did they accept it this time.

19 So they were saying to Him, “Where is Your Father?” Jesus answered, “You know neither Me nor My Father; if you knew Me, you would know My Father also.”

Why did the Pharisees ask to see his father? One possibility is that they genuinely did not understand that Jesus was claiming that God was his Father; Kostenberger calls this an ironic misunderstanding.¹⁰ They were speaking only in human terms. If Jesus had

¹⁰ Kostenberger, 257.

two witnesses, then they wanted him to produce his father as the other witness. The other possibility is that he knew what he was claiming, so they scornfully demanded that he prove his assertion by showing God to them.¹¹ As if anyone could make God appear on demand!

Either way, Jesus replied that they didn't know who his Father was. He knew this, because they didn't know who Jesus was either. To know Jesus is to know God. To see Jesus is to see God (14:9), because Jesus revealed God (1:18). The Pharisees "prided themselves on their knowledge of God; Jesus tells them that they have no knowledge of him at all."¹²

Their legal technicality had been proven false. Jesus had made it plain that they did not follow the Light of the world; they still walked in darkness.

20 These words He spoke in the treasury, as He taught in the temple; and no one seized Him, because His hour had not yet come.

Despite being in a public location and despite their desire to kill him now, they could not seize him. God had a divine timetable for accomplishing salvation through Jesus' death, and it was not yet time for him to die.

Textual Outline

1. Jesus said that he is the light of the world (8:12).
2. Jesus validated his testimony (8:13-20).
 - a. Jesus testified about himself (8:13-16).
 - b. The Father testified about him (8:17-20).

Central Truth of the Text

John wrote John 8:12-20 in order to encourage his readers to follow the light of the world.

Teaching Outline

Jesus is the Light of the world, and he wants you and I to follow him. So this morning I want to make sure that you are following the Light of the world. From our text in John, we are going to find two reasons for following the Light of the world.

1. Follow the Light of the world, because he is the Light of life (8:12).
2. Follow the Light of the world, because he is God's plan for salvation (8:13-20).

¹¹ Borchert, 298. "Whether the Pharisees' question is a bewildered inquiry or an intentional insult is hard to determine" (Tenney, quoted in Morris, 393).

¹² Morris, 394.

Works Cited

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