

Main Idea: According to John 5:31-40 you and I should believe in Christ because of what the witnesses say. Jesus mentions the testimony of five witnesses.

- I. You should believe in Christ because of the witness of another (31-32).
 - A. Jesus knew what His critics thought about Him.
 - B. Jesus also knew that the One whose testimony is true testified about Him.
- II. You should believe in Christ because of the witness of John the Baptist (33-35).
 - A. We need testimony in order to learn the truth.
 - B. We need to heed testimony because we need to be saved.
- III. You should believe in Christ because of the witness of His work (36).
 - A. Actions speak louder than words.
 - B. Jesus’ actions made it clear that the Father sent Him.
- IV. You should believe in Christ because of the witness of His Father (37-38).
 - A. The critics did not hear what He said.
 - B. The critics would not let His word dwell in their hearts.
 - C. The critics refused to believe in the person He sent.
- V. You should believe in Christ because of the witness of the Scriptures (39-40).
 - A. It’s good to study the Bible.
 - B. It’s dangerous to study the Bible with the wrong goal in mind.
 1. Some people study to earn favor with God.
 2. Some people study to keep favor with God.
 - C. We need to study the Bible so that we can know Jesus.
 1. The evidence that you know Him is that you come to Him.
 2. Only those who come to Him have eternal life.

Take Inventory: Two responses are in order...

1. We need to listen to the witnesses.
2. We need to be witnesses.

“I thank heaven for a man like Adolf Hitler.”

That’s a stunning statement, isn’t it, and even more so when you consider who said it, an *evangelical pastor*. Frank Buchman, a reputable American church leader in the 1930s, was in his office at Calvary Church on Park Avenue in New York City. He was being interviewed by the *New York World-Telegram*. Just prior to this he had traveled to Berlin hoping to take the gospel of Christ to Hitler and other Nazi leaders. This was before the war in 1936, the year that Germany hosted the Olympics and Hitler and his supporting cast portrayed Nazism to the world as a good thing and Germany a Christian nation. Pastor Buchman actually had lunch with Heinrich Himmler, Hitler’s notorious henchman who by the time the war ended had killed six million Jews.

“I thank heaven for a man like Adolf Hitler, who built a front line of defense against the anti-Christ of Communism,” said Pastor Buchman. The comment didn’t reflect everything Buchman believed about Hitler, but it certainly reveals how successful Hitler’s early propaganda efforts were.

When Adolph Hitler came to power in Germany, one of his first steps was to get the German church behind him. He portrayed himself as pro-Christian. He quoted Martin Luther. In a 1922 speech he called Jesus “our greatest Aryan hero.”¹ And so, in the early 1930s, hundreds of thousands of well-intentioned church-goers, including thousands of

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¹ Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, p. 168.

pastors, gave their allegiance to the Fuhrer. They believed he was the God-sent man to bring economic and national recovery to the country they loved.

Martin Niemoller actually sent a congratulatory telegram to Hitler, in which he swore the German Christians' loyalty to him, and their gratitude.² Pastor Niemoller later came to regret his actions when he was arrested by the Nazis and sent him to concentration camps for eight years as the personal prisoner of Adolph Hitler. It was years later that Niemoller penned these infamous words:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
because I was not a Jew.

And then they came for me—
and there was no one left to speak for me.³

Friends, it's a tragic fact of history that Adolph Hitler made some deceptive claims that a multitude of people believed, and that blind belief resulted in a foolish trust and allegiance that led to unthinkable destruction in the form of a holocaust and the second world war. There's a lesson here we must not ignore. When a leader makes outstanding claims, you'd better check carefully the validity of those claims before you follow that leader.

How do you test a person's claims, and specifically the claims of a leader that's urging you to follow Him? Put yourself in the shoes of an agnostic for a moment. What should you do with a would be leader who said that God sent him into the world to save it? Who did not conform to the cultural expectations of your society but in fact violated those expectations time and time again? Who went into your place of worship, flipped tables, and drove people out with a whip, and who, when challenged about this, justified his actions by saying you had turned his father's house into a market?

What's more, this would be leader had only a basic level of education, no leadership experience on his resume, and happened to come from a peasant's family in some Podunkville town out in the middle of nowhere.

On top of it all, you were convinced that he was breaking God's law, and when challenged about his actions he responded, "I'm just doing what God my Father told me to do," thus making himself equal with God.

What would you do with such a leader? That's the very situation we find when we open our Bibles to John 5. Jesus just healed a man who's been disabled for thirty-eight years, and He did it on the Sabbath, and He justified His actions by saying He was only doing what His Father was doing? The Jews began to attack Him with the intent to kill Him. Jesus responded by putting His credentials on the table in front of them. You want to know who I am? Here's who I am: one, I'm equal with the Father (16-18); two, I'm submissive to the Father (19a); three, I imitate the Father (19b); four, I'm loved by the Father (20); five, I can raise the dead just like my Father does (21); six, I've been entrusted with the right to judge by my Father (22); seven, I deserve honor just like the Father (23).

² Metaxas, p. 191.

³ Metaxas, p. 192.

Astounding claims, right? But Jesus wasn't done. After the claims regarding His identity, He gives them the claims regarding His purpose on earth in verses 24-30. I've been sent on a rescue mission, He said in verse 24. I'm here to give life to the dead, He emphasized in verse 25. I've come to become a judge, He says in verse 26, to empty graves, He says in verses 28-29, and to render judgment, says verse 30.

My friends, the claims Jesus made put Him in a class all by Himself. But of course, just making claims doesn't make the claims valid, does it? Hitler made claims, but he was a demonic fraud. Claims must be tested.

How do you demonstrate the validity of claims? Here are two ways. One, just give it some time and let people see your claims come true. That's what John does in the rest of his Gospel. He shows us that what Jesus claimed indeed came to be. But at the end of John 5 Jesus did something more immediate to support His claims. He provided external witnesses.⁴

When somebody makes claims, you want to know if anyone else, particularly anyone reputable, agrees with the claims? They do, says Jesus, and I'll tell you who they are. Jesus mentions the testimony of five witnesses in verses 31-40 that make it clear that you and I can and should put our trust in Him.

I. You should believe in Christ because of the witness of another (31-32).

I use the word "another" because that's the word Jesus used in verses 31-32, "If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid. There is *another* who testifies in my favor, and I know that his testimony about me is valid."

Who is this unnamed "another" that's a witness to the validity of Jesus' claims? It's His Father as He'll state in verse 37, but He doesn't identify Him here, not yet. Why not?

Keep in mind the context. In the verses before us, Jesus is talking, not to teachable disciples, but to His critics. He's looking into the eyes of people who want to kill Him, people who are convinced He is a charlatan, a religious fraud, a menace to Jewish society. These are not curious students struggling to make sense of the identity of the God-man. These are look-down-their-noses PhDs who are convinced they know who He is, and they don't want anything to do with Him.

We must see this backdrop if we're to grasp why Jesus said what He said that day. We can't see His eyes and we can't hear the tone of His voice as we read His words found on the page in our Bibles, but I'm confident He's not smiling. I agree with G. Campbell Morgan, "I do not think it is possible to read this, without feeling the stirring of His anger in the presence of the men who put more value on the technicality of a ritual observance, than the restoration of a man to life and righteousness."⁵

Don't miss this or you'll miss the point. The fact is...

A. Jesus knew what His critics thought about Him. And to His critics He said, "If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid." That's interesting because Jesus *did* testify about Himself. That's what He's been doing for the last dozen verses in chapter five, and what He did throughout His ministry. In fact, He later said in John 8:14, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going."

⁴ The word "witness" ("testimony" in the NIV) is very important in John's Gospel and appears 47 times.

⁵ G. Campbell Morgan, p. 93.

So why did He say in our text, “If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid.”? He’s not saying that His self-witness is unreliable. He’s merely addressing one of His critics’ prime objections. *They* said self-witness was deficient.

We understand that, don’t we? I’m not impressed by some egomaniac who makes unsubstantiated claims about his own greatness without providing external credentials. When I go the doctor, I want to see diplomas on the wall and hear testimonials from former patients.

So the critics didn’t buy Jesus’ self-witness. He knew that. That’s why He provided external witnesses. He didn’t need to, but He did it for their sakes, yet another demonstration of His condescending love and mercy. He knew what His critics thought of Him and what they needed. But He knew something else, too...

B. Jesus also knew that the One whose testimony is true testified about Him. The fact is, there is external witness. *There is another who testifies in My favor*, says Jesus. And in a moment He’ll tell the critics precisely who He is.

Of course, in John 5 the Lord is simply following a regulation He gave in the Law He gave to Moses. Deuteronomy 17:6 says, “On the testimony of two or three witnesses a man shall be put to death, but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of only one witness.” You couldn’t convict a man on the basis of one witness.

You see this in the New Testament, too. In 2 Corinthians 13:1, when Paul said he was coming to deal with problem people in the church, he said his charges would be confirmed by two or three witnesses. You don’t exercise church discipline without witnesses. Jesus said in Matthew 18:16, “take one or two others along” when you confront someone in sin, “so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses’” (quoting Deut. 19:15). Don’t even listen to a charge against a church leader, says Paul in 1 Timothy 5:19, unless that charge is supported by two or three witnesses.

That’s what Jesus is doing here. Jesus knew what the Law said, and He knew what His critics thought about legal jurisprudence. You need witnesses, two or three. Okay, here they are.

II. You should believe in Christ because of the witness of John the Baptist (33-35).

Verses 33-35—“You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light.”

John the Baptist was sort of a celebrity in Israel. The crowds flocked to him from all backgrounds—tax collectors, soldiers, even the religious leaders came.

You have sent to John, says Jesus. “Like moths to a lamp,” says MacArthur, “the people flocked excitedly to hear John.”⁶

But they had short attention spans. Once they heard John start calling for repentance and insisting on the fruit of repentance, once he started confronting their hypocrisy, and then once he started baptizing Jews, they started leaving. What?! Baptizing *Jews*? The Jews baptized Gentile proselytes. They didn’t think Jews needed baptism since they were already God’s chosen people. John said they did. John said your birth certificate doesn’t make you right with God. You need to deal with your sin by repenting and making it public through baptism, no matter who you are.

⁶ MacArthur, p. 210.

That kind of preaching didn't sit well. Oh, they liked to hear John. Even King Herod did and sent for him often. But in the end, the hearing didn't result in heeding.

Leon Morris remarks, "The Jews never did take John seriously. They never got to grips with his message... Instead they took him to be part of their ecclesiastical furniture, so to speak."⁷

Warren Wiersbe, who himself in recent days has been a noted author and speaker, made the observation, "Whenever God raises up a spiritual leader who commands attention, there is always the danger of attracting people who want to bask in his popularity but not submit to his authority."⁸

John's witness teaches us a couple of things.

A. We need testimony in order to learn the truth. Verse 33 again, "You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth." That's the purpose of testimony, to substantiate the truth. And what did John say about Jesus? Go back to chapter one and you'll hear...

1:15 "John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, 'This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"

1:26-27 "I baptize with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'"

1:32-34 "Then John gave this testimony: 'I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.'"

John testified to the truth, says Jesus. That's the purpose of testimony, so you can learn the truth. But John's witness teaches us something else.

B. We need to heed testimony because we need to be saved. Verse 34 is interesting. "Not that I accept human testimony," says Jesus. Why not? He wasn't anti-testimony. He just didn't need it. Why did He give it then? "But I mention it that you may be saved."

Don't miss that purpose clause. Why did Jesus mention John's testimony? Not for His sake. He's not defending Himself because He's insecure. It's for *their* sake. They need something and John's testimony can help bring it about. What's that? He says they need *to be saved*.

Talk about offensive language! These are good, upstanding Jews Jesus is addressing. Just ask them and they'll tell you. But Jesus said they needed this testimony because they needed *to be saved*.

Saved from what? From their sin, from God's wrath, from eternal judgment. Do good people need to be saved from those things? No, but the Bible makes it clear there are no good people, not in God's eyes. That's the point. It's the sinner who needs to be saved.

You say, "I don't like to hear negative preaching. I like positive messages." Then you won't like Jesus. He's like that nasty doctor who cares enough for you that he tells you the painful truth you don't want to hear because he wants to save your life.

⁷ Leon Morris, pp. 327-8.

⁸ Wiersbe, p. 307.

But Jesus isn't done. "I have testimony weightier than that of John," He says in verse 36. That brings us to a third witness.

III. You should believe in Christ because of the witness of His work (36).

"I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me."

The old adage is true...

A. Actions speak louder than words. And Jesus' actions certainly spoke louder than John's words. "He is the Son of God," said John. But you didn't buy his testimony, so here's even weightier testimony, says Jesus. *My work.*

I have weightier testimony, says Jesus. You can debate John's words, but you cannot deny the compelling merit of *My work.*

What work is He talking about? The work His Father gave Him to do, He says. Like healing a man's legs on the Sabbath. Like giving sight to a man born blind in chapter 9. Like calling a dead man out of his tomb in chapter 11. That's His work. And ultimately His work took Him to a cross where He gave His life to pay sin's penalty and rescue a people for the praise of God. And having finished His work He got up and left His tomb and returned to His Father's side in heaven, mission accomplished.

My non-Christian friend, are you still unsure about Jesus? Then look at the witness of His work. Study the four gospels and you'll see that He did what no one has ever done. "The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me," He says in John 10:25. So listen. Listen to the testimony of His work. And the conclusion you must draw?

B. Jesus' actions made it clear that the Father sent Him. That's what Jesus said about His work. *It testifies that the Father has sent me.*

But there's more. Jesus calls another witness to the stand in verses 37-38.

IV. You should believe in Christ because of the witness of His Father (37-38).

Jesus begins verse 37, "And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me." The Father. Is that Joseph? No. Joseph was His step-father. Who is His Father? The One who *sent me*, He says, God Himself. He testified concerning me.

When? When did the Father give testimony to Jesus? For starters, in the Old Testament. In Luke 24:44 Jesus told His disciples, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Do you want to hear the Father's testimony regarding His Son? Then read what He said about Him in the Scriptures.

You can also listen to what He said while Jesus was on earth. Hear Him at Jesus' baptism, "This is my beloved Son!" Hear Him again on the Mount of Transfiguration, "This is my beloved Son!"

And the Father's testimony isn't just past tense. The apostle John says it continues in the present according to 1 John 5:9-10, "We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God *has this testimony in his heart.*"

So if you are a believer in Christ, my friend, you have the Father's testimony in your heart right now. *He is my beloved Son,* says the Father. And you respond, "Yes, Father. And by Your grace, Your beloved Son is my beloved Savior!"

Unfortunately, that was not the response we see in Jesus' critics, who, according to Jesus, responded in three deficient ways to the Father's witness.

A. The critics did not hear what He said. That's what Jesus told them in verse 37, "And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. *You have never heard his voice nor seen his form.*" They had the Father's witness, but it didn't help them. In fact, they didn't even hear it.

B. The critics would not let His word dwell in their hearts. That's what Jesus made clear in verse 38, "You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, *nor does his word dwell in you.*" "You do not have his word abiding in you," says the ESV. Nothing wrong with the Father's testimony, but it did these skeptics no good because they refused to hear it and likewise refused to let it have a home in their hearts.

Talk about giving someone painful truth they don't want to hear! That statement surely offended Jesus' critics. They prided themselves in being the people of God. They had the patriarchs. They had the sacrificial system. They had God's Book. *You may have in your hands*, says Jesus, *but you don't have it in your heart.*

And their bottom line problem?

C. The critics refused to believe in the person He sent. "Nor does his word dwell in you, *for you do not believe the one he sent.*" Notice the word "for." Jesus gives the basis for the first two deficiencies. Why didn't these critics benefit from the Father's witness? Why couldn't they hear His voice, see His form, or give His word a place in their hearts? The reason? *For you do not believe in the one he sent.*

So the way you treat the Father and His Son go hand in hand. People say all the time, "You don't need to believe in Jesus to have a relationship with God. He's just one option on the shelf." That's not what Jesus said. Jesus said if you don't believe in the One the Father sent, that's Him, then you will never hear the Father's voice and His word will never find a place in your heart.

Here's the sinner's problem, my friend. He doesn't hear the Father's voice, see His form, or let His word find a resting place in his heart. To put it another way, he doesn't have a relationship with the Father. And he doesn't have a relationship with the Father because he refuses to believe in the Son.

Every one of us who know Christ know people who need Christ, and we're burdened for them. But never forget this. This is their predicament, beloved, as once was ours. They cannot hear the Father's voice and they have no place for His word in their hearts, and they never will until they believe in His Son, and they'll never do that until the Spirit works the miracle of regeneration in their hearts. "You must be born again," Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3. That's why we must not only talk to sinners about Christ but also to Christ about sinners. Pray for them, beloved. Pray to the One who alone can cause deaf ears to hear and dead hearts to believe.

But Jesus isn't finished. He identifies a fifth and final witness.

V. You should believe in Christ because of the witness of the Scriptures (39-40).

Jesus begins verse 39, "You diligently study the Scriptures." Stop and ponder that for a moment. You can actually take the verb as an imperative ("Search the Scriptures," as in the KJV) or an indicative ("You search the Scriptures," as in the NKJV, ESV, and NIV).

Sadly, as Kent Hughes points out, in some homes the family Bible serves two purposes. It's used to record births and deaths and to press flowers.⁹ That was not the case with Jesus' critics. They studied their Bible.

It's a known fact that over the years the Jews have expressed their devotion to the Scriptures in some amazing ways. In pre-computer days, they actually counted the verses, words, and even letters of every book. They calculated the middle word and middle verse of every book. When they copied the Scriptures, a scribe wasn't allowed to do more than one letter before looking back at his source again.¹⁰

We're talking about people who took the Bible seriously, and that's a good thing.

A. It's good to study the Bible. There is no substitute for consistent Bible intake. If you want to be a strong Christian, you need to take Bible study seriously. And that's true whether you have a seminary education or if you never finished high school.

Dr. Ironside pastored the well known Moody Church in Chicago for years, but he never studied formally beyond high school. But he was a devoted student, and especially a student of the Bible, as this biographical sketch reveals:

"Under his mother's guidance Harry began to memorize Scripture when he was three. By age 14 he had read through the Bible 14 times, once for each year. During the rest of his life he read the Bible through at least once each year."¹¹

His biographer relates one very revealing story, as told by a pastor friend. Once Ironside and this pastor friend were two speakers at the same Bible conference. During the conference the two men talked about their devotional life. The man told Ironside what he had read that morning for his devotions and then asked his friend what he had read to begin his day. Ironside hesitated, then humbly said, "I read the book of Isaiah."¹²

Ironside was a devoted student of the Book, and it showed. So yes, it's good to study the Bible, and if you're not, I urge you to get started. But know this...

B. It's dangerous to study the Bible with the wrong goal in mind. That's what Jesus said His critics did in verses 39-40, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."

Did you catch the wrong goal? These people studied the Scriptures because they thought in so doing they would gain eternal life. They saw Bible study as a step on the stairway to heaven.

The problem hasn't gone away either. Even today...

1. Some people study to earn favor with God. They view salvation as a reward for good deeds. "I read my Bible. I know I'm going to heaven." One of Israel's greatest rabbis, Rabbi Hillel, said, "Whoso hath gained a good name, has gained it for himself. Whoso hath gained the words of Torah, hath gained for himself life in the world to come."¹³

You say, "I know better. I know you can't earn favor with God through Bible study." Okay, then consider this.

⁹ Kent Hughes, p. 171.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, p. 331, footnote 117.

¹¹ Kent Hughes, p. 172.

¹² Kent Hughes, p. 172.

¹³ Hillel, quote taken from Kent Hughes, p. 170.

2. *Some people study to keep favor with God.* And so they have their devotions every day religiously, not to earn God's favor but to maintain it. "I have to study my Bible today because God loves me when I do good things, and He withholds His love when I don't." Does that thought ever cross your mind? It's not true. God didn't give us the Bible so we could earn or maintain His favor.

Why then? Listen to Jesus. "These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life." There's why...

C. We need to study the Bible so that we can know Jesus. The Scriptures testify about Him. So if we're going to know Him, we need to know the Scriptures. But don't miss this.

1. *The evidence that you know Him is that you come to Him.* Not just come to the Book, but come to the person that we meet in the Book. Because...

2. *Only those who come to Him have eternal life.*

It's sort of like this. Suppose you're standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon. It's a breathtaking sight, for sure. You lean forward and begin to look at the huge chasm through the eyeglass of a telescope, and you marvel even more. All of a sudden you hear a voice.

"It's phenomenal, isn't it?" says the person that's standing next to you. Before you can respond the man continues, "I never get tired of looking through it. It's the best telescope you'll ever find for your money."

And then he proceeds to give you the specs of the telescope, a detailed explanation of how the instrument works, who made it, where it's manufactured, and how you can get one for yourself. "I'll send you the catalogue if you'll give me your address. You won't regret it. *Phenomenal.* No doubt about it."

The guy missed the whole point, didn't he? The purpose of the telescope isn't to fascinate you with itself. It's there to enable you to enjoy the beauty of something beyond itself, something truly glorious and worthy of your attention.

So again, I hope you cherish your Bible. But if you do cherish your Bible in the way God intends, then you'll open it up and come to Jesus.

What do you think about Jesus, my friend? The critics in John 5 rejected him, and worse, many of them hounded Him all the way to the cross. What about you? Have you come to Jesus? He came that you may be saved. Have you come to Him, repented of your sin, and put your trust in Him?

If so, are you coming to Him? Do you make coming to church a priority? It needs to be, for the gathering of the church is the gathering of His Body. Do you make personal Bible study a priority? It needs to be, for the Scriptures enable us to know Him.

Take Inventory: Two responses are in order...

First of all...

1. *We need to listen to the witnesses.* We've heard them today (John the Baptist, Jesus' work, the Father, and the Scriptures) and they all say the same thing. You need to believe in Christ. He's worthy of your trust, affection, and allegiance. But don't just listen to the witnesses.

2. *We need to be witnesses.* Those were His marching orders, "You shall be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth." Who can you visit today to tell about Christ? Who can you invite to your home this week to point to Christ?