

COVENANT PULPIT



THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
KNOWING JESUS

DEMONIZING JESUS

John 8:48–59

Sunday, October 25, 2026 | Pastor Trent Casto

It's a wonderful time of year. Fall is in the air (somewhere), pumpkin spice lattes abound, and football is on TV. It's also the time of year when we start to see demons popping up everywhere. I'm not talking about Halloween season; I'm talking about campaign season. This is the time of year when political candidates and political action committees spend millions of dollars to convince us that the other side of the aisle is filled with demons.

Demonizing our opponents is nothing new. It's been going on for a long time. But there does seem to be a noticeable uptick in recent years. As of last June, Republican and Democratic hatred of each other was at a 40-year high. Many Americans are willing to justify violence against their opponents.ⁱ Christians are not immune to this. Last April, the man who attempted to assassinate the president at the White House Correspondents' Dinner did so because he felt he *must* do so. In his manifesto, he wrote: "I am a citizen of the United States of America. What my representatives do reflects on me. And I am no longer willing to permit a pedophile, rapist, and traitor to coat my hands with his crimes... Turning the other cheek when *someone else* is oppressed is not Christian behavior; it is complicity in the oppressor's crimes." Did you see the way he made his way around the real Jesus in order to justify personally taking up a weapon as judge and executioner? As a Christian, he felt compelled to assassinate the president and anyone associated with him. This is essentially what demonization does. As one psychology professor has written, "For most human beings, it takes an awful lot to allow them to kill another human being. The only way to do it is to justify the killing, to make the enemy look as evil as possible."ⁱⁱ

We may never pick up a weapon, but that doesn't mean we don't demonize people in quieter ways. We do it when we assume we know someone's motives: "they don't really care about kids who think they are transgender, they just want to corrupt them," or "they don't really care about unborn babies, they just want to control women's bodies," or "they don't really care about the poor, they're just greedy." Sometimes we label people as a way to demonize them with words like "woke" or "MAGA," "fascist" or "snowflake," that turn a person into a category we've already judged as evil.

And it doesn't stay in politics. It happens in the church, when we call brothers and sisters heretics or wolves over secondary issues, or when we harbor bitterness over how other believers handled the COVID years. It happens at home, with the ex-spouse, the in-law, the former friend who has become the villain of our story. Once someone is cast as the villain, nothing they do can ever be read charitably. And in every case, demonizing others does one thing for us: it makes us the hero. And it provides an adequate excuse for whatever we do next.

But why do we do it? Everyone has a "center," something we believe gives us significance and makes us right. Whatever that center is, it controls us as the core of our identity. It could be our ethnic or religious heritage, our political tribe, our moral record. When that center is threatened or challenged, we are likely to go into attack mode because our identity is being threatened. The greater the threat, the more likely we will demonize the other.

That's exactly what is happening in our passage today. In John 8:48-59, these deeply religious and moral people literally demonized Jesus Christ. Why? As Pastor Chris preached last week, they were resting in their identity as the children of Abraham. That was their center. But Jesus said to them in John 8:47,

"Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."

They think they belong to God on account of their relationship to Abraham, and Jesus says they don't belong to God on account of their rejection of Jesus and his word. Rather than surrendering the identity which they believed made them right and righteous, they decided Jesus must have a demon. If people would do that to Jesus, we can be sure we still do it to each other. The reason we demonize people is the same reason they demonized Jesus. But as we'll see, the cure is the same too. We're going to look today at the Jesus we demonize, the Jesus who knows the Father, and the Jesus who is I Am.

I. The Jesus We Demonize.

In response to Jesus's statement that they are not of God, we read in verse 48,

"The Jews answered him, 'Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?'"

The Jewish leaders make two accusations against Jesus to explain away the things that he is saying. First, they call him a Samaritan. Remember, there was tremendous enmity between Jews and Samaritans that we highlighted in John 4 when Jesus engaged the Samaritan woman at the well. The Samaritans had created a truncated form of Judaism that rejected all of the books of the Old Testament except for the Pentateuch. They also worshiped on Mount Gerizim rather than on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Samaritan religion was false religion. Did Jesus actually say anything that would have been in common with what Samaritans believed? I don't think so. But he was challenging them and their bad theology, and anyone who did that went into the same category: outsider, heretic, enemy.

Second, they say he has a demon. The gospel of John doesn't spend a lot of time on demonology, unlike some of the other gospels. But it was commonly understood, and we see numerous examples of it in the New Testament, that a person could be possessed or oppressed by a demon. The effect of this real demonization was that a person was sometimes out of their right mind, sometimes had seizures, sometimes had self-destructive tendencies (like throwing oneself into a fire), sometimes spoke through the voice of the demonized person, and sometimes possessed superhuman strength. Because Jesus is critiquing them, they charge him with being demonized.

Now listen to how Jesus responds in verses 49–50,

"Jesus answered, 'I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge.'"

Notice what Jesus doesn't do. He doesn't demonize them back or trade insults with them. He has told them some hard things,

namely that they are liars and their father is the devil. But telling the truth for their benefit is different from demonizing for his own protection. He answers plainly and tells them the truth. He says he honors the Father, and they dishonor him. By implication, an implication they surely did not miss, that means they dishonor the Father by dishonoring Jesus. As we've seen many times in this series, Jesus is the perfect representation of the Father. If we do not honor Jesus as God, we do not honor God.

But Jesus is also quick to point out that he is not out for his own glory. Someone else is seeking it, and that someone is the judge of all. It is interesting that here Jesus calls the Father the judge, since in 5:22 he says the Father has given all judgment to the Son. This probably highlights their intimacy in working together: the judgment of the Son isn't isolated from the Father, and the Father does not judge except through the Son.ⁱⁱⁱ In any case, the warning here is clear. The one who is the judge of all is determined that Jesus be glorified. What will the judge do with those who dishonor Jesus? We do not want to find ourselves on the wrong side of this verdict.

Then Jesus tells us what's at stake in verse 51,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."

Jesus holds out the promise to those who keep his word that they will never see death. That's a great promise. So what does it mean to keep his word? It means first to believe what he says. Those who believe his words will also live by them. To those people Jesus promises: you will never see death.

But wait, don't Christians die? Didn't Jesus himself die? What is he talking about? Jesus is talking about death here as more than the temporary separation of the soul from the body that all of us will experience if he doesn't return first. Jesus is speaking of death as the separation of body and soul from God himself. This is hell, the second death. Those who keep Jesus's words will never experience separation of body and soul from God himself. We need not fear death in the common sense of

the word, but we should be very concerned about the second death. Jesus said,

"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were told by Nebuchadnezzar that if they didn't bow down and worship his idol, they would be put to death. They said they wouldn't bow down even if they were killed. They were willing to embrace the first death to avoid the second. Too often through history, fear of the first death has caused people to embrace the second death. May it not be so with us!^{iv}

The Jewish leaders hear Jesus's promise that those who keep his word will never see death and say in verses 52–53,

"The Jews said to him, 'Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, "If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death." Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?'"

Abraham was the father of the faith, and he died. Not only that, but the prophets such as Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel all died. Jesus is claiming that those who keep his word won't die. Who does he think he is, greater than Abraham?

Do you see what's happening? Every time Jesus speaks he is threatening their center, their identity as Abraham's children that they are trusting in. So they keep attacking and demonizing Jesus. It still happens. I heard a story a couple years ago about a churchgoer who complained to the pastor about the liberal talking points in his sermon. The pastor asked which points. The church member said, "The turn the other cheek stuff." The pastor said, "Those were Jesus's exact words." The attender then said, "Yeah, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak." Here we've got a person who has let political identity become the center, and that center now decides which Jesus is allowed to speak. The Sermon on the Mount Jesus is (mildly) demonized.

People on the other side of the spectrum can do this too. Jesus literally says throughout the gospel of John that he is the judge, and in this passage he describes the Father being the judge. He says that those who reject him will be separated from him forever and bear the wrath of God. Yet there are people who will demonize him and say, "I could never worship a God who judges people." They can't let their conception of God go, so they edit out the real God. We demonize Jesus to protect what we believe gives us life, but he promises that those who keep his word will live.

Even those of us in worship every week can get twisted. We can grow attached to our mental image or our own creation of Jesus and not know the actual Jesus at all, so much so that we mistake Jesus for a demon-possessed man! How do we avoid that? We have to actually spend time with Jesus. Read his actual words, listen to him speak. Ask what his words reveal about his heart and his priorities. Listen to the apostles who are the only divinely inspired interpreters of Jesus's life and words.

II. The Jesus Who Knows the Father.

Jesus answers their question about who he is making himself out to be in verses 54–55,

"Jesus answered, 'If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, "He is our God." But you have not known him.'"

That is a sobering sentence. These were the most religious people in Jerusalem. They prayed, fasted, tithed, and studied the Scriptures intensely. They said, "He is our God." And Jesus said, "you don't know him." Once again we are reminded that it's possible for us to sing the songs, know the verses, love the right moral things and not know God. How can we tell? One way we can tell is if we don't have a relationship with Jesus. We can't know the Father without knowing the Son, and certainly not while rejecting the Son. Another way we can tell is that we do not keep his word. When his word contradicts our lives or our viewpoint, we edit it rather than obey it. That's what they were doing.

Now, here's the reality: we've all done the same thing. None of us pass this test. In some way we have edited Jesus to make him fit what we want him to be and do. If knowing God depends on our record of keeping his word, we don't have a prayer. But look at what Jesus says in the rest of verse 55,

"I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word."

There is good news in this hard passage. There is a Son who has perfectly known the Father, one Son who has perfectly kept the Father's word. Jesus never edited God, never demonized him, never bent the word to protect his comfort or reputation. He kept it all the way to the cross. He kept it for us, in our place.

This changes everything about what it means for us to keep Jesus's word. We don't keep his word to earn our place with God. Jesus has already kept it for us. We keep his word because we have been kept by him! Our obedience is not what qualifies us to have a relationship with the Father, but our trust in Jesus's obedience does. Our obedience is the fruit of the relationship we enjoy with a God we know, love, and trust. And that's why trusting Jesus allows us to increasingly bend our lives in the direction of his, honoring the Father as Jesus did because we love him.

Then see what Jesus says next in verse 56,

"Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad."

What exactly did Abraham see? Think of Genesis 22. God told Abraham to take Isaac, the son of promise, the one through whom his offspring would be named, and offer him as a sacrifice. Hebrews 11 tells us that Abraham went, believing God could raise Isaac from the dead. When they got to the place of sacrifice, Isaac asked Abraham, "Where is the lamb?" And Abraham answered, "God will provide for himself the lamb." Just as Abraham is about to slay him, God stops him. God had provided a ram caught in a thicket as the sacrifice. And Abraham called that place,

"The LORD will provide" (Gen. 22:14).

Abraham saw by faith that God would one day provide the true substitute. He believed the promise that through his offspring all the nations would be blessed. And that offspring is Jesus. Abraham looked down by faith through the centuries to the day when the true sacrifice for sin would be offered to turn away the wrath of God and reconcile his lost children. And he rejoiced! Meanwhile, these leaders who claimed Abraham as their father wanted to kill Abraham's joy. How do you feel about Jesus? Abraham rejoiced to see him. Do you?

III. The Jesus Who Is I Am.

Now, when Jesus says that Abraham rejoiced to see Jesus's day, you know these guys are not going to like it. I like how Kevin DeYoung illustrates this. Imagine your history teacher giving a lecture on US history, talking about George Washington and all that he did at the founding of our country. Then imagine that your history teacher begins to speak as if he's better than George Washington. Now we have some pretty bold politicians willing to claim almost anything, but I don't think even our current president would say he's better than George Washington! Now imagine your teacher running for office said, "If you vote for me, I'll be better than George Washington. In fact, George Washington's whole life, it was about me. He rejoiced, he thought about me, he was looking forward to me. Take everybody on Mount Rushmore; they'd vote for me!" That's what they're hearing Jesus say.

So they respond in verse 57,

"So the Jews said to him, 'You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?'"

Abraham lived about as far from Jesus's time as we do from Jesus's time. They point out that he's not even fifty so what he's talking about is ludicrous. But then Jesus takes it up another notch in verse 58,

"Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.'"

Notice what he didn't say. He didn't say, "Before Abraham was, I was." That would just make him really old. He said,

"Before Abraham was, I am." That makes him eternal. Jesus is identifying himself with the God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush and said, "I am who I am." This is how Jesus can say Abraham rejoiced to see his day. Jesus knew Abraham. He knew what was in Abraham's heart on Mount Moriah because he was there. He is not just a teacher who came after Abraham; he is the God Abraham trusted, and it was counted to him as righteousness!

This is also why Jesus can promise that those who keep his word will never see death. Because he is the I Am, the one who has life in himself and can give it to others. He can say he knows the Father because he has been with the Father from eternity past. They wanted to know who he makes himself out to be. The answer is, he is the God of Abraham.

And they understood exactly what he was saying, which is why it says in verse 59,

"So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple."

The law said that anyone who blasphemed the name of the Lord must be stoned to death (Lev. 24:16). As far as they were concerned, they were defending God's honor by killing Jesus. In the name of protecting God, they were trying to kill God.

But the text tells us that Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple. On that day, Jesus would not submit to death. It wasn't his hour yet. But a day was coming when he would not hide. In just a few chapters, Jesus will walk out to meet the soldiers who came to arrest him and when he says, "I am he," they fall to the ground. He will not hide when they come to arrest him and take him to the cross. He will go willingly. And there on the cross, he will take something far heavier than stones. He took the judgment that our false religion and our demonizing hearts deserved. The one who was called a demon bore the wrath of God for the people who called him that. He hid from the stones on this day so he could go to the cross in our place, so that all of us who trust in him will never face the death he died for us.

Ultimately this is the only reality that can free us from our need to demonize other people. As long as our standing depends on our heritage, party, moral record, or being right, we will be in an endless fight to defend ourselves and demonize others, including even Jesus. But when our standing rests on Christ's record instead of our own, we have nothing left to defend. We no longer have to be the hero because we have one. We have Jesus, and he is enough. We can be free to let Jesus contradict us and challenge our views. We can say, "You're right, I'm wrong" without fear of losing everything. We can be free to engage with people who disagree with us, to read or listen to them charitably, and to disagree without needing to demonize.

Finally, we can be free of the fear of death. Jesus said,

"If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."

How good is that promise? When we make marriage vows, our promise is "till death do us part" and "as long as we both shall live." But God's covenant promise to us is different. It's not "till death do us part," but it continues through death. It's not "as long as we both shall live," but as long as *he* shall live. And how long is that? Before Abraham was, I Am. Because he always lives, so will we who trust in him.

Sermon Discussion Questions:

1. Everyone has a “center,” something we believe gives us significance and makes us right. For these leaders, it was being Abraham’s children. What are some common “centers” for people in our community? If you’re willing to share, what might yours be?
2. Jesus told these men hard truths: they were liars, and their father was the devil. Yet he did not demonize them. What’s the difference between telling someone a hard truth and demonizing someone? How can you tell which one you’re doing?
3. How does it change things to know that Jesus kept the Father’s word perfectly *for us*? How is keeping his word because we’ve been kept different from keeping it to earn our place?
4. Abraham rejoiced to see Jesus’s day. How do you feel about Jesus? Is joy a word that describes your relationship with him right now? What tends to crowd that joy out?
5. How does Jesus’s promise that those who keep his word will never taste death change the way you face your own death, or the death of someone you love? Where does fear of the first death still have a grip on you?

ⁱ David Cycleback, “The Dangers of Demonizing Opponents,” *Minneapolis Times*, June 14, 2025, <https://minneapolistimes.com/the-dangers-of-demonizing-opponents/>.

ⁱⁱ Anthony Pratkanis as quoted in Cycleback, “The Dangers of Demonizing Opponents.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Edward W. Klink III, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan Academic, 2016), 422.

^{iv} Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Tractate XLIII.12.

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