

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

...I AM!—John 8:58b

The reason why we can have a series entitled the “I AM...” statements of Jesus is because of this one statement. This is the granddaddy of them all. If not for this one, the other ones wouldn’t be as nearly as significant. In this statement, which harkens back to Exodus 3:14, Jesus makes the boldest, strongest, statement about who He is...He is I AM...He is YHWH.

As you probably know, each Gospel writer has their unique take on the life of Jesus, their particular bent, emphasis, and focus. John’s is the divinity of Jesus. While all the Gospel writers, in their own way, acknowledge this, John strongly emphasizes it. The I AM statements that we are looking at in this series demonstrate it.

We always want to be careful of taking one line out of context. It’s important to see this current statement as a continuation of the earlier “I AM the light of the world statement” (8:12) discussion/discourse.

Exercise:

Starting at John 8:31 (or you can go as far back as 8:12 if you’d like) note all the references to Jesus’ divinity. See how many you can find.

It is interesting to note the transition between 8:30 and 8:31. Verse 30 sounds very optimistic, *“Even as He spoke, many put their faith in Him.”* But then the rest of the chapter is a pretty tense and antagonistic conversation between Jesus, as verse 31 tells us, *“To the Jews who had believed Him...”* Wow, there’s no mincing of words here; no easy-believe-ism. Jesus takes those who were favorably disposed to Him to a deeper revelation of truth...and they ended up balking. We should keep in mind that when John speaks of “the Jews” he didn’t necessarily mean all Jews, but rather the Jewish religious leaders, many of whom were struggling in trying to figure Jesus out.

Perhaps the most head-scratching statement in this entire passage comes in response to Jesus’ well-known statement, *“...the truth will set you free”* (which itself is often taken out of context—knowing the truth is qualified/conditioned upon holding to Jesus’ teaching). But the Jews responded with, *“We are Abraham’s children and have never been slaves to anyone.”* (8:33) WHAT!?!?!? Part of their identity as a people was the fact that they had been slaves in Egypt and that God had delivered them. The Festival they were all in Jerusalem for at that very moment pointed back to that time in their history. And even at the time of this interaction with Jesus, though they weren’t technically “slaves” to the Romans, they were hardly what we or they would call “free”. The entire tension of their time, not to mention their hope and expectation of what the Messiah would bring, was freedom from the Romans. How could they possibly utter the words that they had never been slaves to anyone? Simply mind-boggling.

Somehow, they had lost track of their identity; they had become short-sighted (if not blind) to who they were, and Whose they were. Even their statement that “we are Abraham’s children” demonstrates that they were missing the point, the greater picture, and were settling for something less than God’s best for them. Yes, technically, biologically, genetically, they were descendants of Abraham, but they were meant to view themselves as God’s children. While Abraham was a great man of faith, the father of their nation, they were forgetting the point that the real family they were invited to be a part of was God’s. Did they want to be children of Abraham or children of God? And they weren’t actually behaving as children of Abraham either. The fact is, their true colors were showing in that they wanted to kill Jesus. Such murderous intentions demonstrated who their true father was...the devil (8:44). This is where Jesus took the conversation.

Verse 41b informs us that the “unique” story of Mary’s conception, of the paternity of Jesus, was pretty well known as the jab, “We are not illegitimate children...” indicates.

This whole passage (8:31-59) really draws out the question of what is our hope and what do we put our confidence in to achieve that hope? The hope of the Jews was as misunderstanding of the covenant promises of God, and their confidence was their genetic link, their heredity, to Abraham. While this passage alone doesn’t flesh it out, the entire ministry and teachings of Jesus clarify the broader and deeper understanding of God’s covenant promises. And the kicker, confidence should be placed in God...i.e. Jesus Himself.

Let’s not make any mistake about it...they understood what Jesus was saying/claiming. They understood Jesus was claiming to be one with God, thus God Himself. When Jesus said, “...before Abraham was born, I AM” (8:58b) they knew clearly what He was saying. And it was the most scandalous thing they had ever heard. It would actually be blasphemous (and thus deserving of death)...if it weren’t true. But it is true. Jesus is God. He is more than just a “good moral teacher”, more than a spiritually enlightened historical figure. If you claim to be God, you’re either deranged/delusional, or a lying deceiver (both of which, then, exclude you from being a good teacher or spiritually enlightened)...of you actually are who you say you are. Jesus being God is a game-changer, to say the least...for them, and for us, and for the entire world.

So, what kept them from being able to accept that? It’s the same thing that keeps people today from believing it. In a word...sin. Please allow me to share some thought from N.T. Wright...

“There is a worse slavery than that which they had suffered in Egypt, or the semi-slavery they were suffering under the rule of Rome. It is the slavery that grips not only individuals but also groups, nations and families of nations. It is the slavery we know as ‘sin’.

The trouble with saying that out loud is that many people in the Western world are bored of hearing about sin. They think it just means offenses against someone else’s old-fashioned morality, often in matters to do with sex. But that’s far too small-minded a view. Sexual sins matter, of course; they matter very much. They can destroy a person, a marriage, a family, a community. But there is more to sin than sex, and sin as a whole is far greater than the sum of its parts. When people rebel against God in whatever way, new fields of force are called into

being, a cumulative effect builds up, and individuals and societies alike become enslaved just as surely as if every single one of them wore chains and was hounded to work every day by a strong man with a whip.”

Q. What do you really think about Jesus? Who do you say He is? How comfortable or troubled are you with the idea that He is God? What are the implications of Him being God (both on a personal/individual level, and on a global level)?

Q. What ought we expect in a world where some people recognize Jesus as God and some people don't? How do we navigate living in such a world?

Q. A big part of our identity is our history. (You may recall the Emotionally Healthy Spirituality series, and one of the key points being we have to go back in order to go forward.) Have you come to terms with your past? Are you aware of how your past effects your present? (Our past doesn't define us—Jesus defines us—but our past nevertheless affects us. We want to be eyes-wide-open to it and make peace with it in order to move forward in a healthy way. If we don't, then we can, like the Jewish leaders, end up placing our hope and confidence in the wrong things, or not know what we ought to be aiming at.)

Q. Are you a disciple of Jesus? (i.e. are you holding to His teaching?) How so? Describe that.

Q. Are you a slave? I'm not asking if you're being pushed around by a boss, or being told what to do by someone else? I'm just asking what Jesus asks us to consider. Are you a slave?

- **Are you a slave to some uncontrollable addiction?**
- **A slave to substance abuse?**
- **A slave to food?**
- **A slave to other people's opinions of you?**
- **A slave to your anger?**
- **A slave to your job? Or making money?**
- **Are you a slave to your sexual appetites or brokenness?**
- **Are you a slave to yourself?**
- **Are you a slave to your own habit of self-promotion?**

(HG Leaders—be careful with this one, but at the same time, don't be afraid to go there. This is asking people to get read “soul-naked” with each other—which is good, healthy, and important—but not without its dangers. Please use discernment, discretion, and sensitivity.**)**

Q. Consider your own spiritual/religious heritage. In what ways has it been a blessing? In what ways has it been a detriment/handicap?