

(7) Belief and unbelief

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 0 0] The reading today is from John chapter 12, verse 36 to 50, and it's page 1084 in the Church Bibles. When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them.

Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the words spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled. Lord, who has believed what he had heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.

Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. Nevertheless, many, even of the authorities, believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees, they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue.

For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. And Jesus cried out and said, Whoever believes in me, believes not in me, but in him who sent me.

[1 : 3 2] And whoever sees me, sees him who sent me. I have come into this world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.

The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge. The word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment, what to say and what to speak.

And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me. Let me add my welcome to Grace Church this morning.

It's very good to have you with us. And lovely to be able to welcome Sam Voss as well. And especially on a sunny day, when we met up for lunch in Cape Town when I was there in February, and it's cloudy.

[2 : 4 3] So Sam, a very warm welcome to sunny London. Indeed. It's very good to see you. Well, let's pray together, shall we? Heavenly Father, thank you for this wonderful theme we've been thinking about this morning, your great compassion for your people.

Thank you that in your compassion, you have sent your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you that he speaks your words, that he does what you do. And therefore we pray that as we look at John chapter 12 together this morning, as we look at the words of Jesus, please would you grant us understanding, and we pray that you would transform us, not only in the way in which we think, but also how we live.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, John chapter 12, page 1084, if you've closed the Bible.

And the issue, I think, for us this morning, as we come to the end of our series, looking at John chapter 11 and 12, which we've been looking at since Easter, the issue for us this morning is why don't more people believe in Jesus Christ?

Because this passage here at the end of John 12, it very much marks the end of Jesus' public ministry in John's Gospel. In the next five chapters, Jesus will teach his disciples, the apostles, on his own, privately.

[4 : 07] He'll then be arrested and crucified. So then what do we expect the conclusion to be here at the end of Jesus' public ministry?

Perhaps to read that tens of thousands of people believed in him and followed him and put their trust in him. But have a look at verse 37. Though he had done so many signs before them, that is, before the Jewish people of the day, they still did not believe in him.

That is a shocking thing to read, isn't it? After all, Jesus has behaved exactly how you'd expect God to behave when he came to earth. He's taught with the most extraordinary authority.

He's demonstrated that he's the ruler of the world by showing his power over the forces of nature, his power over evil. Most recently, he's raised the dead, as we've seen in John chapter 11, as he raised Lazarus from death to life.

What's more, at the end of John's Gospel, John makes the point that he's recorded these miracles or signs, he calls them, so that we will believe in Jesus. And it's true, it's not that no one believed in him, but far fewer believed than we might expect.

[5 : 32] In other words, we need an explanation for what one writer calls such a large-scale, catastrophic unbelief. It's important, because it seems to me that raises a number of issues for us.

After all, perhaps we're looking in on the claims of Jesus so to speak this morning. And we may well think to ourselves, well, hang on a moment, if the people who saw Jesus face to face and who heard him speaking to them, if they rejected Jesus in such large numbers, the Jesus to whom their Old Testament scriptures pointed, then why should I, in 2008, accept him?

And it's something that those of us who are Christians find perplexing too, isn't it? Once we've grasped that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh, once we've begun to experience the reality of the eternal life that Jesus speaks about, life with God now in this world that continues on into the next, once we've begun to know the joy of knowing the living God, why it can be very perplexing to discover that others reject him.

And not only perplexing, of course, but in the long run, it can be very, very disheartening. And with that comes all the temptation simply to keep a low profile as a Christian and to kind of retreat into a Christian ghetto because at least there, we are appreciated and accepted.

Well, in today's passage then, in the last half of John chapter 12, Jesus helps us to get to the very heart of this issue of unbelief. And he shows us the two reasons for it.

[7 : 17] And notice, of course, these are Jesus' reasons for unbelief. A number of people have been saying over the last few weeks how wonderfully refreshing it is here in John's Gospel to hear these kind of extended teaching sessions of Jesus.

And here we see the two reasons Jesus himself gives us for unbelief. There's no outline on the back of today's service sheet, mainly because I've been away this week on a conference, but there's plenty of space for notes.

So first of all, Jesus is rejected because people will not believe in him. Because people will not believe in him. Have a look, will you, at verses 37 to 38.

Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the words spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled.

Lord, who has believed what he heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? Now this is the first explanation that Jesus gives, and it is that people will not believe in him.

[8 : 24] It's very clear, isn't it, in verse 37, they still did not believe in him. And the reason comes for us in verse 38, where John quotes from Isaiah chapter 53 in the Old Testament, which, as we saw last week and also saw in our study groups the previous week, is one of the glorious passages which so clearly in the Old Testament describes exactly what will happen when Jesus comes to earth.

And this quote from Isaiah is the key to understanding why people won't believe in Jesus. And so I'd like us to keep a finger, please, in John chapter 12, and to turn back to Isaiah 53, which you'll find on page 742.

Isaiah 53, page 742. Now just look back to the end of chapter 52, 52 verse 13, where Isaiah describes God's servant who will be lifted up, the lifting up, the crucifixion of Jesus.

And then chapter 53 verse 1, Isaiah asks a question. Who has believed what they heard from us? And to whom is the arm of the Lord been revealed?

This is Isaiah's report, if you like, of the astonishment of the nations as they hear that God's servant, who we know to be Jesus, has been rejected, even by his own people.

[9 : 55] The message that Isaiah refers to is clearly the teaching of Jesus. The arm of the Lord refers to his miraculous signs. In other words, Isaiah, as he looks forward to the coming of Jesus, is saying that Jesus will be rejected both in his teaching and also in his signs or miracles, which is just what we've seen in John's Gospel, those of us who have been following.

And the explanation for that rejection comes in the following verses, verses 2 and 3. For he grew up before him like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no form or majesty that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

And as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not. Well, did you spot the reasons why he'll be rejected?

It is because of Jesus' humble origin and because of his suffering and death. And those are exactly the same issues which were stumbling blocks in Jesus' day.

[11 : 09] Jesus didn't come as a kind of glorious king who would boot out the first century occupiers, the Roman army. Not the kind of triumphant king they were expecting.

Instead, he was a very different sort of king. As we saw three weeks ago, he was a king who came on a rescue mission. And of course, the heart of that rescue is that he came to die. Over the last couple of weeks in John chapter 12, we've seen, haven't we, Jesus' own explanation of his death.

That it's through his death that he would offer eternal life, forgiveness to people from all nations who will come to him and put their trust in him. Indeed, he describes his death as the moment of his greatest triumph.

And it's no coincidence back in John chapter 12 that it's after that explanation that we are told that people won't follow Jesus. Because of course, it's humbling, isn't it, to be told that Jesus came on a rescue mission.

It's a humbling thing to be told that you need to be rescued. I mean, just think of some of the things that Jesus taught us over the last few weeks as we've been looking at John chapter 11 and 12.

[12 : 23] That we all deserve judgment. That by nature, we are on the side of the devil and not on the side of God. That it's only through his death that Jesus can bring life to others and forgiveness.

That there's nothing we can do ourselves to get right with God. that we need a rescuer. And of course, being rescued is always a very humbling business.

A few years ago, Rachel and I were staying with some friends on Lock Ore up in Scotland. One afternoon, the friends suggested that they look after Hannah, who then was a one-year-old, and that we take their motorboat out on the lock for the afternoon, which we duly took them up on the idea.

It sounded absolutely wonderful. Well, they started the engine for us. But the one thing they hadn't explained was actually the choke lever didn't work properly and there was a particular kind of knack that was needed to start the engine from cold.

Or at least, that's what I like to maintain that they failed to tell us beforehand. Well, it was a wonderful September day. In about 30 minutes, we had posseed across to the other side of the lock.

[13 : 34] We lit a fire. We brewed some tea. That's marvelous. Everything seemed to be going perfectly well. until, that is, we decided to head back to the other side in time to rescue Hannah and pick her up.

Well, as you can imagine, the engine was cold and we couldn't get this motor started. I thought of the hours it would take to row back. I thought of the humiliation if our friends had to come and rescue us.

Well, fortunately, there was a fisherman who was able to help out, who was able to get the motor started again. He tried his best not to sound sort of too condescending, but it didn't quite work.

I felt a complete idiot not able to get this engine started. My male pride very sorely dented. It's humbling, isn't it, having to be rescued?

And that is why people will not believe in Jesus. Because, of course, to believe in him I need to humble myself. I need to admit that actually however good and upright and moral and respectable I am, I am not on God's side.

[14 : 51] To admit that however much others, however well others regard me and however well seen and thought of I am in this life, that is not good enough to get to heaven.

I need to recognise that Jesus Christ has died in my place. I need to come to him. I need to say sorry for living my life without reference to him.

It is a humbling thing to do, isn't it? That is Jesus' first answer to the question. Why is it that more people don't believe in him?

You see, is it because there is not enough evidence? Why, of course not. There is ample evidence. Evidence in John's Gospel or the miracles of Jesus. Is it because Jesus' teaching was obscure or unclear?

No, his teaching is plain. Rather, it is because the message of the cross is a humbling message for us. And therefore, of course, if we are Christians here this morning, as obviously most of us are, we mustn't be surprised or caught out by unbelief.

[16 : 00] I think it's easy to become discouraged when friends or family members or colleagues show little interest in the claims of Jesus. Or perhaps when they show interest for a while and then turn away.

And of course, the great temptation when that happens is to simply give up, isn't it? Or to think, well, I'm no good at telling others about Jesus. So I'll leave it to other people who are better than me or who we think are better than we are.

Or perhaps to think that the message of Jesus isn't powerful enough and just to retreat. But don't let unbelief catch you out like that. Now for those of us who are looking in, as it were, on the claims of Jesus, I'm always delighted that there are a number like that here on a Sunday morning.

Why, will you ask yourself the honest question, what is stopping you from following Jesus? Could it just be that actually it is too humbling a thing to begin to follow him?

So first of all, Jesus is rejected because people will not believe in him. But secondly, Jesus goes on to explain that he is rejected because people cannot believe in him.

[17 : 14] We're moving from will not to cannot. And notice as I read verses 39 to 40, how the did not of verse 37 has been replaced by could not in verse 39.

Verse 39. Therefore, they could not believe. For again, Isaiah said, he has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they see with their eyes and understand with their hearts and turn and I would heal them.

Now, if we thought the first reason for unbelief was uncomfortable, the second is even less palatable as we, again, listen to the lips of Jesus. And it is, if you look at those two verses, it is that Jesus is saying that God actively blinds and intervenes and has done that to prevent people believing in him.

It's a shocking thing, isn't it? Jesus is saying that God has intervened actively and deliberately to prevent them believing in Jesus. And once again, John explains that for us by quoting from Isaiah.

This time from Isaiah chapter 6. So again, keep a finger in John chapter 12 and turn back, if you will, to page 690. Isaiah chapter 6, page 690.

[18 : 35] Now, here we are at the beginning of Isaiah and the situation is that the people had had God's message talked to them, had God's message explained to them, but had refused to listen.

And if you just look back to chapter 5, verse 21, that in the sense serves as a good summary of their attitude to God's message, to God's word. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and shrewd in their own sight.

And so, in Isaiah chapter 6, God commissions Isaiah to be his prophet. it. But what is it that he is to say to God's people? Well, have a look at verses 9 and 10.

God says to Isaiah, go and say to this people, keep on hearing, but do not understand. Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.

Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.

[19 : 49] What is God saying he'll do? Why, he'll blind them so they cannot understand what he is saying. Why? As a punishment for their continued and obstinate refusal to listen to him.

Isaiah, the prophet, will be ignored, scorned, rejected by precisely the people he is sent to speak to. It's not that God is being unfair or making it impossible for otherwise good people to understand.

No, this is the condemnation of guilty people who will not listen to God, and so they are given over to what they have chosen. God will not enable them to listen.

They will be unable to listen to him. And that is exactly the situation, isn't it, in John chapter 12. We go back there. A willful rejection of Jesus and his teaching is followed by God's judgment as he blinds eyes and deadens hearts and makes it impossible for people to turn to him for forgiveness.

forgiveness. Now, I take it this is very, very sobering teaching for us. I take it that here is an aspect of God's character which is very uncomfortable, yet it's very important that we understand it.

[21 : 16] God is patient. He is more patient than we could ever imagine. We've been thinking this morning, haven't we, about God's great compassion on his world. He longs that everyone would come to put their trust in him.

God so loved the world that he sent his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall have eternal life. But Jesus is telling us here that God's patience does run out.

Let me relay the gist of the conversation that Rachel had with an elderly, frail lady just this last week whose husband is even more frail than she is.

Our understanding is that she was brought up in a Christian home. Now her life is clearly drawing to an end. And she said to Rachel, I won't repent.

I know I've done lots of things wrong, but so has God. It's chilling, isn't it, to be able to get to the end of your life. She is the most delightful lady.

[22 : 23] And to say that. And I presume she spent her life saying that. I don't believe it. I won't repent. And her heart has been hardened.

Jesus is rejected because people cannot believe in him. Now let me say, I think it's very easy for us to react to this in the wrong way. The first wrong response would be to conclude that God cannot then hold me responsible for my unbelief.

After all, if God is blinding my eyes and deadening my heart, how then can he hold me responsible? But Jesus never talks in that kind of language. After all, we see just in verses 37 and 38 that we are culpable.

Now this is the blinding of those who will not listen. Jesus is immensely compassionate, but he does blind those who finally will not listen. I think another wrong response is for those of us who are Christians to think, well, if God is going to harden people's hearts, then there's no point in trying to proclaim the message of Jesus to them because they simply won't listen.

But again, that is a wrong response. So then, how should I respond to this teaching? Well, let me make three suggestions. First of all, I am to heed the warning that God's patience does and can run out.

[23 : 51] It seems to me it's quite possible to be quite good at saying no to Jesus. You know, I'll put it off until life is less busy, I'll put it off until my job is less busy, I'll put it off until I retire, or whatever it is.

But of course the problem is that every stage we get more and more practice at saying no. And here is the warning for us that God will blind our eyes and deaden our hearts so that we won't be able to say yes.

I take it it's why the final deathbed conversions are so very, very rare. Because actually if we spent our whole life saying no to Jesus and his call upon us, why we're not going to change, are we, at the last minute?

We've spent our whole life saying no, because we get better and better at doing it. Here's a terrifying warning that God hardens hearts.

But I take it that as well as heeding the warning, I must cry out to God for mercy. Becoming a Christian is not some kind of leap of faith. I know that's often the way in which it's portrayed, but that is a totally wrong view.

[24 : 57] Rather, it is about examining the evidence, investigating, trusting in Jesus Christ, because that is the direction in which the weight of the evidence pushes us to go. But of course, this passage reminds us that however much investigating and thinking I do, I still need God to open my eyes and to enable me to hear and to understand if I am to put my trust in Jesus.

So if you're here today looking in on the claims of Jesus Christ, would you ask him to do that for you? So that is the first right response.

But then I think a second response is simply to ask the question, if we're here today claiming to be Christians, claiming to be followers of Jesus, I think we do need to ask ourselves a question, questions I've tried to ask myself this week as well, is our faith genuine?

You see, have a look, will you, at verses 42 and 43. Nevertheless, many, even of the authorities, believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees, they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue.

For they love the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. Here are people who are leaders of the establishment.

[26 : 20] It seems, doesn't it, that in some sense they believe in Jesus, but it's a belief that's very superficial. They fear what others think of them. And such secret faith, says Jesus, is actually no faith at all.

Because to love the praise of men, is in the words of verse 25, which we looked at two weeks ago, to love this life. Or in the words of verse 26, it is not serving Jesus, it is serving ourselves.

And again, there may just be some here this morning for whom that is very much the issue for us. Yes, at one level we know that the teaching of Jesus is true, but it's very much a kind of superficial surface belief.

Actually, we're afraid of what others would think if we began to follow Jesus seriously. Perhaps afraid of what colleagues would think, or family members, or friends we've known for years.

Well, if we're in that position, will you ask yourself honestly, whose praise is really more important to me? The praise that comes from God, or the praise that comes from other people?

[27 : 31] I think it's a chilling diagnosis, isn't it? As Jesus says of them, they love the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. But then a third response, which is that if I'm a Christian believer, I undertake every opportunity and continue to take every opportunity that I have to proclaim the message of Jesus, and to pray that as I do so, God will open the eyes and the ears of those I'm speaking to.

Now, the reason we know that is the right response is because it is precisely what Jesus continues to do in this section. You see, have a look, will you, at verse 47. As Jesus says, if anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him, for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.

Now, Jesus is not saying there that he's not the one who will judge us on the judgment day. He makes it quite clear back in John chapter 5 that he is. And he alludes to that fact in verse 48.

The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge. The word that I have spoken will judge him on that last day. Rather, in verse 47, Jesus is saying that in his first coming to earth, he came not to judge, but to save.

He's come on a rescue mission, the compassion of God that we've been hearing about this morning. And therefore, of course, the point is that until Jesus' second coming, now is the moment of God's mercy, now is the moment of opportunity.

[29 : 10] Clearly, when Jesus returns, it will be too late, but in this era of history in which we happen to live, between the first coming of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus, while we're in an era when the message of Jesus is to be proclaimed, and therefore, in these final few hours, Jesus continues to do that.

It's very striking, isn't it? You see, he doesn't simply say, you people won't believe, I'll turn my back. No, he continues in compassion to proclaim his message.

It's the very last thing we see him doing. This is the very last part of Jesus' public ministry. ministry. And therefore, clearly, the challenge for us as a local church is to make sure that is our priority, and I take it that is the challenge for us as individuals as well.

Let's pray together. Amen. If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him, for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the remarkable compassion of Jesus as he continues to proclaim his message even to those who have rejected him.

[30 : 53] And we want to pray, Heavenly Father, as a church family, we would take this teaching of Jesus to heart. We're humbled to be reminded that all of us by nature have such hard hearts, yet we rejoice that you are the one who can open blind eyes.

And we pray, therefore, that we would be those individually and as a church family committed as Jesus so clearly is here to proclaiming his message to those who as yet don't believe it.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.