

(3) Belief and unbelief

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[0 : 0 0] Our reading is taken from John chapter 6, beginning at verse 60, and can be found on page 1076 in your Bibles.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, This is a hard saying, who can listen to it? But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, Do you take offence at this?

Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life. The flesh is of no avail.

The words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe. For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.

And he said, This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father. After this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.

[1 : 0 9] So Jesus said to the twelve, Do you want to go away as well? Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God.

Jesus answered them, Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil. He spoke of Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.

For he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him. Let me add my welcome to you. It's very good to see you here this morning. Well, do let's please keep John chapter 6 open on page 1076 as we continue our series in John's Gospel.

I think my nerves have recovered sufficiently having watched the rugby last night. Let me read an extract from Lewis Carroll through the looking glass. Let's consider your age to begin with.

How old are you? I'm seven and a half exactly. You needn't say exactly, the Queen remarked. I can believe it without that. Now I'll give you something to believe.

[2 : 2 2] I'm 101, five months and a day. I can't believe that, said Alice. Can't she, said the Queen, in a pitying tone? Try again.

Draw a long breath and close your eyes. Alice laughed. There's no use trying, she said. I can't believe impossible things. I dare say you haven't had much practice, said the Queen.

When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast. Well, there is Lewis Carroll writing in Through the Looking Glass, commenting on the enigma of faith.

Why is it that some people believe things which other people simply find impossible to believe? In the world of Alice and the White Queen, faith is all a matter of effort.

Hold your breath, close your eyes. Advises the Queen, you can believe anything, if only you try hard enough. But of course we know that life is not that simple. Holding our breath, closing our eyes, forcing ourselves to believe things.

[3 : 32] Well, that is simply the world of fantasy. Take, for instance, what Christians believe. At one level, it's extraordinary, isn't it?

That God himself became man and walked on the earth. Yet we don't feel that we aren't forcing ourselves to believe the impossible, holding our breath, as the Queen advised, to believe that.

No, we believe that we believe in what we intuitively feel to be the truth. Yet, of course, others don't believe. Yet, the evidence that Jesus was more than a man is compelling.

The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus cannot be denied. The New Testament documents are far more reliable than any other documents written at a similar time. So why is it then that others, despite the odds it seems, don't believe in Jesus?

Well, that polarisation of responses happened in the first century just as much as it does today. We've seen that throughout John chapter 6, if you've been here, over the last few weeks.

[4 : 42] And most of all, we see it in this final section, which we're looking at today. Have a look at verse 66. And here we are, at the very end of the chapter, a chapter in which Jesus has explained the rescue which he's come to bring.

Yet, what do we find, verse 66? After this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. Yet, as we read on, we discover that others believe, verse 67.

So Jesus said to the twelve, do you want to go away as well? Simon Peter answered, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

And we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God. Well, why is that? Why is it that some people believe, others don't believe?

That is the question which is answered, I think, in these two paragraphs. You'll see an outline on the reverse side of the service sheet. First of all, belief in Jesus Christ is humanly impossible.

[5 : 42] Belief in Jesus Christ is humanly impossible. Now, what we're going to see is that all of us naturally take offence at Jesus, that we naturally take offence at his teaching, that left to our own devices, we cannot come to him.

Now, that is encapsulated for us by Jesus in verse 63, if you have a look at it. It is the Spirit who gives life. The flesh is of no avail.

Now, by flesh there, Jesus simply means what we can do in and of ourselves. And he says it counts for nothing. Left to our own devices, we will never have the eternal life that Jesus offers.

In fact, if you've been with us over the last couple of weeks, we've seen, haven't we, how people rejected Jesus and how people rejected his teaching. We saw a couple of weeks ago, for some, it was because of what we call their materialistic agenda.

Do you remember back in verse 26, Jesus' rebuke, as he said, Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

[6 : 57] Some people reject Jesus because, while they'd be perfectly happy to believe in a Jesus who came, for example, to tackle global poverty or economic injustice or who came simply to deal with our own personal problems, that they're not interested in a Jesus who has come to rescue from sin and judgment and offer eternal life.

We've seen that others rejected Jesus because of their religious agenda. We've seen in this chapter, it's quite possible to be religious, to ask all the right questions, even to ask the question, verse 28, What must we do to be doing the works of God?

But although they're religious, we saw, didn't we, they wouldn't do the one thing that God required of them, which was to believe in Jesus. Others rejected Jesus because of his teaching about himself.

For some, it was his claim to have come down from heaven. And they grumble. Verse 42, They say, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?

How does he now say, I've come down from heaven? And it's that very teaching that can cause people to reject Jesus today. Happy, yes, to accept that Jesus was perhaps an impressive teacher or a significant religious leader.

[8 : 23] But they will not accept that he was God in the flesh. For others, it was Jesus teaching them at his death, that he would die on behalf of others, as we've been hearing about this morning already, so that those who believe in him can be forgiven and can have eternal life.

And if you were here last week, looking at verse 53, Jesus went on, didn't he, to spell out the negative. As he said, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

Now that was hard teaching in the first century, just as is a hard teaching for us today. And people walked away. And if that offends you, says Jesus, why there is more to come.

Verse 61. Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? Wait, says Jesus, till you see me rise from the dead and ascend back to heaven.

So can we see why in verse 63, Jesus says, The flesh is of no avail. Because you see, as we've looked through John chapter 6, as we see people's reactions to Jesus Christ, we see, don't we, that left to their own devices, people are unable to come to Jesus and to receive the life that he offers.

[9 : 50] In fact, this whole section in John chapters 5 to 10, which we're looking at through the autumn up until the beginning of December, this whole section reveals the true state of human nature.

It shows us, if we like, Jesus' own diagnosis of what we are by nature like. Now, I've put some of the references on the outline, you'll see them there, and I think they are very striking.

Let's just look at some of them briefly. So turn back to John chapter 5, verse 24. As Jesus says, Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.

He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Now, notice Jesus' assumption there, which is that all of us are condemned on the final judgment day.

For unless we believe in him, we face the judgment. Notice, too, his assumption that all of us are by nature spiritually dead. We have no spiritual life in us.

[10 : 57] We are by nature like a corpse. Now, next time you're in a supermarket, next time you go to Sainsbury's or wherever it is, or Tesco's, go to the fresh meat counter and tell one of the chickens to get up and run around.

I suggest you do it while no one else is within earshot, so to speak, or you might be the one who is sort of removed and locked up or something like that. No, a corpse is helpless. It cannot do a thing.

Or turn on a couple of chapters to John chapter 7, verse 7, John chapter 7, verse 7, where Jesus says that by nature we are evil.

The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil. Or over the page, chapter 8, verse 12, that again, by nature we walk in darkness.

Again, Jesus spoke to them saying, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. Jesus' assumption that without him, we are in darkness.

[12 : 05] I guess it's a picture that's easy to understand, isn't it? If someone says they're in the dark, they're clueless, which is exactly what all of us are by nature like about the things of God.

Or look on to chapter 8, verse 23. You are from below. I am from above. You are of this world. I am not of this world.

As Jesus says, our spiritual home is earthly and not heavenly. Or chapter 8, verse 34. Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.

We are slaves to sin. We cannot by ourselves break the habit of sin, break the habit of living a life in rebellion against God. I guess if we're honest with ourselves, we'll know that to be true, that we are enslaved to sin and enslaved to the consequences of sin.

Finally, over the page, chapter 9, verse 39, we see that all of us are by nature spiritually blind. As Jesus says, for judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see.

[13 : 21] Now, we'll be looking at John, chapter 7-9, in more detail over the next few weeks. But I hope for the time being we can see that the force of Jesus' diagnosis of the human condition.

They're the words of Jesus and they're as plain as a pike staff, aren't they? We can't say, well, this is simply a kind of matter of interpretation. No, they are crystal clear what Jesus says here.

And I guess it cuts, doesn't it, right across the grain of our culture. A culture which assumes that men and women are basically good. So you look at our education system, our welfare system, they are built on the assumption that people are essentially good.

And the assumption that any problems in society are not because there's something wrong with people, but because there's something wrong with the environment in which we are brought up in.

But no, such Jesus, the real problem lies within. Now, I want to suggest that deep down we know that to be true. Just listen to this very revealing comment from the comedian Ben Elton.

[14 : 34] He said this on interview. I have faith that there is greater good in human beings than evil. despite all the evidence to the contrary.

Isn't that a very striking comment? In other words, we want to believe that we are essentially good, but all the evidence points us in the other direction. So that delightful neighbour, who is a pillar of the community, respected, charming, cultured, is according to Jesus Christ condemned, spiritually dead, evil, walking in darkness, from below, a slave to sin, a child of the devil, evil, and blind.

It's no wonder, is it, that Jesus says the flesh is of no avail. I still have vivid memories of my last week as a student.

Exams were over and one afternoon a number of us took a boat up the river. It's one of those wonderful sunny days that seem to go on forever and ever. Until, that is, someone fell in.

We all laughed. Until we realised he couldn't swim. Our laughter turned to horror as we saw him floundering around in the water, gasping for breath, literally a few feet away from the boat, but totally helpless and unable to do a thing.

[16 : 00] Well, that is the picture, isn't it, which Jesus paints of human nature. As he says in verse 65, this is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.

You see, I think sometimes even as Christians we can find ourselves thinking, well, if only that friend came on the right course, or if only they heard a brilliant speaker like Rico Tais, who we had nine days ago speaking here, then surely they'd become a Christian.

As if believing in Jesus is like learning a new language. You know, you do the right course, you do the homework and eventually you'll get there after a bit of effort. But according to Jesus, that couldn't be further from the truth, could it?

Verse 63, the flesh is of no avail. It's profoundly challenging to our view of human nature. It's profoundly challenging too, isn't it, to our view of religion.

You see, any religious system which depends on my own ability to pull myself up by my own bootstraps. Must be a non-starter, mustn't it? Whether it's keeping the five pillars or following the teaching of the church or any other man-made religious system.

[17 : 18] It's the equivalent to telling that drowning friend to swim harder or the supermarket chicken in Sainsbury's to get its act together and start running around. Belief in Jesus Christ is humanly impossible.

But secondly, it's the Spirit who makes belief in Jesus possible. The Holy Spirit makes belief in Jesus possible.

Because look again at verse 63, it is the Spirit who gives life. The flesh is of no avail. The words that I've spoken to you are spirit and life.

It's the Spirit who gives life. Now, throughout John chapter 6, we've seen, haven't we, Jesus' offer of eternal life. An offer that is possible because of Jesus' divine origin.

He alone has come down from heaven, therefore he alone reveals God to us. And possible too because of his death on behalf of others dying in our place so that we might be forgiven and have eternal life, life of God in this world and also in the next.

[18 : 30] But of course that still begs the question, how will anyone actually believe in Jesus' rescue? Well, the answer, verse 63, it's God the Holy Spirit who makes that possible.

It's the Spirit who gives life. Now, John gives little time to it here because it's something he's already taught earlier on in the Gospel.

So turn back when you keep a finger in John chapter 6 and turn back to John chapter 3, where we see that it's the work of the Spirit to bring people to new birth.

We looked at this earlier on in the year. Let's just remind ourselves of it, John chapter 3, verses 4 to 7. Nicodemus said to Jesus, how can a man be born when he is old?

Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

[19 : 34] That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again.

It's the Spirit who brings new birth, the Spirit who brings spiritual life. And how does the Spirit bring that new birth? Well, look back to John chapter 6, verse 63.

As Jesus says, the words I've spoken to you are Spirit and life. It's the words of Jesus which are the product of the Spirit and which give eternal life.

It's the words of Jesus which the Spirit uses to bring spiritual life. Just as Jesus said back in John 5, 24 which we looked at a few moments ago, truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life.

It's the words of Jesus that the Spirit uses to bring people to new life because those words are Spirit, they are from the Spirit, and they are life.

[20 : 52] They give life. And if we look on, that is what is so distinctive about Simon Peter. You see, have a look at verses 68 and 69.

Unlike those in verse 66, he's not going to turn away from Jesus. Why not? Because as he says, he knows that Jesus has the words of eternal life. He's believed those words and as a result he has come to know that Jesus is the Holy One of God, that he is God in the flesh.

But notice Jesus makes it very clear that it's not all down to Peter's belief. Because as soon as Peter says, verse 69, we have believed, Jesus then answers, verse 70, did I not choose you?

Now, we find it very difficult, don't we, to hold those two things together. We touched on this two weeks ago, if you missed the talk two weeks ago, do listen to it and download it and listen to it or listen to it again.

We find it very difficult to hold these two things together but both things are true simultaneously. The Christian is someone who has consciously come to believe in Jesus Christ yet at the same time the Christian is someone who has been chosen by God, chosen by Jesus.

[22 : 12] Let's just return to our scene by the river where we left off. Now, I guess one of us could have thrown my friend a life belt but actually it's not much good if you're floundering around in the river gasping for breath.

Now, what he really needed was for someone to dive in and rescue him. And that's exactly what happened. Someone who was more quick thinking than I was dived in, dragged him to the edge of the boat and we hauled him in to the boat to safety.

In the same way, Jesus doesn't throw us a life belt, so to speak. As if to say, look, I've died for you, all you have to do now is to come to me and believe.

Because he knows we're helpless. So that even that act of believing Jesus' words and coming to him, why even that is a gift from God. Have a look again at verse 65.

This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father. You see, why is it that some people believe in others' days?

[23 : 24] Well, belief comes through a miracle of divine grace. It is God's initiative. It is a gift. That is how anyone comes to believe in Jesus.

God's is God's saying, I was asking the question, how do I know I'm really going to heaven?

How can I be sure I'm not going to fall away? Well, I guess if it was simply a matter of our own efforts, we could never be sure, would we? perhaps thinking to ourselves well have I done enough? have I lived the right sort of life?

if it were simply a matter of the fact that we'd believed in Jesus again we'd never be sure but perhaps we'd always be asking ourselves well was my belief sincere enough? have I believed enough?

but Jesus' teaching gives us great security doesn't it? it is his hold on us and not our hold on him that matters you see let me ask those of us who are Christians here today why are you a Christian?

[24 : 41] we who are by nature condemned dead, evil, walking in darkness from below a slave to sin, a child of the devil blind and helpless why are you a Christian? well I take it we can't take any of the credit ourselves it's not because we're clever enough to have worked it out it's not because we were sort of genetically predisposed to believe it's not even because some of us were brought up in Christian homes although of course the great privilege of a Christian home is that we do hear the words of Jesus why are we Christians?

well only because of God's amazing grace he has granted us to come to him but then for a moment think about that neighbour or colleague or family member who is not a Christian how will they ever become a Christian?

well they're not going to get there by themselves are they? but wonderfully the spirit uses the words of Jesus to bring spiritual life so let me ask do we have confidence in the words of Jesus?

many of us invited people to come and hear Rico Tice last week let's have the confidence to keep on inviting people to hear the words of Jesus there's that women's lunch coming up in November which we heard about earlier there'll be carol services in December or any Sunday for that matter at Grace Church because you see the wonderful encouragement yes there will be those who turn their backs on Jesus just as here in John chapter 6 there will be those who turn their backs on Jesus but there will be others who will believe as Jesus says all that the Father gives to me will come to me well for those of us who are looking on the Christian faith well I take it that the first step towards spiritual health is to recognise Jesus' diagnosis of our own spiritual condition is to recognise that we are by nature helpless but then the second step is to recognise that belief in Jesus is a gift it's not a result of trying but of listening listening to

God addressing us in Jesus listening to God calling us to himself I take it there's no point in sort of tormenting ourselves with futile questions about whether we're on God's list of chosen people or not no the issue is do we want to come to Jesus will we listen to him if we will God will enable us to come to Jesus and have eternal life and at that point we will find that these words that were spoken to Simon Peter are also the words which were addressed to us did I not choose you well why don't we spend a few moments in quiet I shall then pray and then we've got time for one or two questions it is the spirit who gives life the flesh is of no avail the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life heavenly father we're very conscious that for some of us these words throw out loads of questions but we praise you for the great promises in them thank you that you graciously diagnose our own natural spiritual condition and thank you heavenly father the lord Jesus speaks words which are true that they're from the spirit himself and they are words that give life thank you for the great confidence we can have in these verses and we pray that you'd help us to grasp them more and more and to see the wonderful implications and we ask it for Jesus sake amen