

Why Unbelief?

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Date: 18 November 2018

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[0 : 00] Father, we've just been praying that we believe in the Holy Spirit. We ask, Father, that you will give us your Holy Spirit as we hear your word, that you will make clear to us your truth and your great promises.

We pray, Father, that you will give us the gift of belief in Jesus so that we might glorify Jesus as we meet together. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.

Please be seated. Well, I want to echo James' welcome to you, and it's wonderful to see you all here. We're gathered around the 11th chapter of Matthew.

We've been in a sermon series on the Gospel of Matthew. And what we've been seeing in this Gospel and in this last chapter is Jesus making clear a reality that we would not know otherwise.

The reality of who God is for us and our relationship to Him. And as I was thinking of this on this beautiful, sunny Sunday morning, this morning I was driving to church for the 7.30 service where the real Christians, the committed Christians are.

[1 : 13] They listen to those sermons early. And so I had a thick layer of frost on my windshield. It was very, very thick, and so I scraped it off with something with a sharp edge.

I don't know what it was. And I started driving, and it just frosted up again. And I had to pull over. Even though my pride wanted me to see if I could keep going and make it, pulled over.

And I had to wait until things became clear with my heater going on to the front windshield. I think what Jesus has been doing in Matthew and this Gospel is to make things clear for us where we were in a car that was frosted up.

We would not know the clarity of what is outside of us, what true reality is all about. He has been saying this to the crowds. He has been showing who He is and what God is going to do for them.

But there is a problem in this chapter. It is the problem of unbelief. In fact, it's not just unbelief. It's offense. Jesus says earlier in this chapter, Blessed are those who are not offended by me, is what He says.

[2 : 27] Isn't that a remarkable thing? He has been saying who He is. He has been speaking about the gift of grace. He has been speaking about Him being the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel.

And Israel is offended. This passage, these four little verses that Ben read so well and clearly, speak to our culture today because many are offended by Jesus Christ.

He says, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me. There is an offense about who He is. There is widespread unbelief that we know of in our city and amongst our friends and relatives as well.

It's widespread. And there is an offense at this in our culture about who Jesus is. But if you are a Christian today in this service, you know that unbelief also creeps into your relationship with Jesus as well.

You might not want Him to be Lord and in charge of certain areas of your life. I don't want to believe and entrust myself to Him in those areas.

[3 : 40] And we're going to see that in these four short verses as well. It's a short reading. It's very relevant for us today because it says three things to us.

It tells us what unbelief is. And it also tells us, secondly, what the root of unbelief is in our lives and in the lives of the people around us.

But thirdly, it tells us how we can believe. How can I have faith? How can I deal with unbelief? And amazingly, this comes out in these four verses.

So let's jump into it. First of all, what is unbelief? Well, first of all, it's not your desire for reasons to believe. Because a non-believing person has the right to ask for what the evidence is for believing in Jesus Christ, for knowing what the case is for Christianity.

And we welcome these questions at St. John's. We want to talk to you about what it means to believe in Jesus, who He is, why is there a reason to believe? Bruce Milne is going to be speaking on Tuesday about, what is the name of it?

[4 : 49] Know the Truth. And we want to share, we want to be able to share why it is that we believe and what the truth is. We welcome your questions as well.

All of our questions can be addressed. And many of them can be answered. And there may be some questions that you ask that we will need to say, honestly, I really don't know the answer to that.

God doesn't give us the answer to that. But we welcome opportunities to share what the case for Christianity is. Because often, Christianity is dismissed without knowing the case for it.

So that's not what unbelief is that we're talking about in this passage. The unbelief in this passage is this settled refusal to look at the evidence, to consider it.

It's a hard heart towards Jesus that demands more and more evidence and sort of just chews it up and chews it up and wants more. It looks for reasons not to believe.

[5 : 49] Unbelief is saying, I'd have to see an incredible miracle, like the dead being raised, before I would believe that Jesus is real and He is who He said He is.

And if you look down in chapter 11, on page 816, you'll see right after our passage in verse 20, that Jesus speaks to the nearby cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum.

These are cities that Jesus spent a lot of time in. And it says that He denounces them because this is where most of His mighty works had been done. Yet people did not repent.

They did not accept who Jesus was. They did not believe in Him. And He's saying, you know, if these mighty works were done in these pagan cities where they have no idea who the true God is, like a side and entire, they would have repented a long time ago and in a major way.

You see, the people who are suffering from unbelief, those crowds, were deeply privileged over the last few months in this area of Galilee.

[7 : 00] Because they had John, for one thing, come. They knew about him. They knew his message, preparing the way for Jesus. The greatest prophet in the world came to Israel that we have ever known, came to Israel and preached God's direct word.

And then Jesus, of course, comes. The Messiah lives among them, does incredible miracles, preaches in this clear way about God's plan for salvation, His grace come to earth invading this broken world.

But despite this powerful evidence, there is this widespread refusal to accept that Jesus was their Savior, that Jesus is the Messiah so long promised in their word, the Bible.

In Him was forgiveness and life. They didn't accept that. They thought, who is this guy from Nazareth? How can He come from God, this familiar person?

What claim does He have on my life? Unbelief. That's what unbelief was. And if you're a Christian, you and I don't get off this hook.

[8 : 15] Because each of us can have a hard heart towards Jesus in certain areas of your life, even as you have belief in Him. And we saw that in John last week, didn't we?

His life and his ministry was completely focused on Jesus. He believed in Him. He was a follower. Yet he wondered, how can I be in jail if Jesus really is the Messiah bringing the kingdom?

Why hasn't He made everything right if He is true? And we ask the same thing in our hardships as well. Why doesn't God make it right?

Is He real? Can I entrust myself to Him? What are those areas in our life where we feel real difficulty in trusting ourselves to? Well, that's that unbelief creeping in to our lives.

So you see, unbelief is not just a lack of something like faith. And you know, I know lots of people have come to me who aren't Christians and said, I wish I had faith. But it's not because of a lack of faith or a lack of answers to questions.

[9 : 23] Unbelief is the presence of something. There is something that prevents you from accepting that Jesus could be your Lord.

That He could be who He says He is. And that brings us to the second part of what Jesus is teaching. And that is, what is the root of unbelief?

What is that thing that's present that keeps me from believing? Well, Jesus answers that question by telling a story. And the wonderful thing about Jesus is He loved children.

Children had a spot in Jesus' heart that was very, very dear to Him. He understood children. He had insight into who they are. He didn't want anybody to prevent children coming to Him.

So He tells a story about children that's full of insight. He says, You people who are listening to me right now, filled with unbelief, you're like children in a small Galilean village near the Sea of Galilee.

[10 : 27] And by far, the biggest occasion in those villages, the high points of the year, were funerals and they were weddings. And He said, Jesus said, Imagine these children want to, of course, reenact these things in their life in between the weddings and funerals.

And He said, Imagine children playing games in two groups. And one group are upset with the second group of children. Because they wanted to organize a pretend wedding.

And they played the flute. They did it quite well. But the others would not do anything. They wouldn't dance like all the men were meant to do at any wedding in that village.

And they ruined the whole wedding game. It's completely ruined. Kaput. So the first group says, Okay, you don't like the wedding game? Let's go with the funeral. And so they played a dirge.

A funeral march. A funeral song. And they did it really, really mournfully. Really sad. But the others absolutely refused to join in.

[11 : 35] They just sat there. They didn't mourn and wail like the women of the town always do if it's going to be a proper funeral. And so now, Jesus says, That first group is calling them out.

Literally. You've ruined the game. You're no fun at all. So why wouldn't they join in? It's because it wasn't their game.

It wasn't their song. That second group hadn't thought of it. So it didn't fit in with what they wanted to do. They wanted things to go their way.

And you see, that is the perfect illustration of pride. Which is the root of all unbelief. It is the big thing that prevents belief in the Lord Jesus.

And the pride is not this goodness of taking pride in a loved one or taking pride in your work. This is the pride of putting self above everything else, including God.

[12 : 37] One person say after the sermon at 730, he said, he told me about a theologian who I know who said, Sin is the creature not wanting to be the creature.

And what that means is it's not recognizing that you have a creator who is greater than you and wanting to be something other than what you really are, what your identity is.

And you see that operating in verses 18 and 19. If you look at this, you hear this. Jesus says, John came neither eating nor drinking.

And they said, he has a demon. The son of man came eating and drinking. And they say, look at him, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

And they dismiss both of them. You see, John came with bad news. It was a sobering message. It is the funeral song.

[13 : 35] He's saying, you crowds need to mourn. You are far away from God. You are lost in your sin. You are separated from God. You need to repent and deal with your sin to get ready for the Messiah who is close at hand.

There's an urgency. John is so serious and so mournful of grief at this sin that he doesn't do any frivolous eating or drinking. He just eats locusts and honey in the desert.

But because of pride, many reject that message. They say it's too sad. We are religious Israelites.

We're righteous people. How can we be lost in our sins? We have entitlement. And the response was to reject John very personally, to say he has a demon.

He's irrational. He's crazy in what he's saying. Why would we listen to him? Jesus comes singing a different song with actually the same theme.

[14 : 35] But Jesus comes with the good news. He said, You need to dance because the bridegroom is here. God's own son, the Savior, has come among you.

And he invites everyone to a banquet of his grace, which is the forgiveness of sins and a new life in his kingdom. And he invites every kind of person.

In fact, he particularly invites those who are the farthest away from God. But the crowds he spent so much time with rejected that offer of life as well.

The celebration. Why do you celebrate so much? He said, We are God's special people, they say. We know how to live the righteous life. We don't need you to bring us life.

And you eat and drink way too much. And with the wrong kinds of people, the worst kind of sinners. So the question is, Why would this crowd reject both the sad tune and the happy tune that came in John and Jesus?

[15 : 44] They had many presenting reasons why they were deeply offended by these messages. But the real reason is that they wanted to be in charge. They wanted to determine the course of their own life.

That is pride. It's saying that Jesus' song is not my song. And this is the thing that is hardening the hearts of the crowd as they are listening.

You see, both John and Jesus' message are about our spiritual helplessness. And both of them speak to our desperate need for God's grace.

For him to come and give to us what we could not possibly obtain for ourselves. You see, John's message confronts us with how serious our sin is.

He says, There's nothing you can do on your own about the sin. You cannot earn forgiveness. And this deeply injures our pride because it means you need a savior.

[16 : 51] And you look for a million reasons to reject him. John says, Repent. Why? Because you need to be ready for somebody to help you in a way that you could not possibly do on your own.

And then Jesus is inviting you to a life that you can never get on your own as well. It is almost too good to be true. Because by grace alone, Jesus saves you and God accepts you as his child forever.

And there's absolutely nothing that you can offer or give except for your sin to obtain that gift. And that's what real life is.

Nothing that you contribute except your sin. Everything you receive by God's grace alone. And you see, Jesus' message is saying, You really don't know what real life is until you come to Jesus.

He is saying, If you don't want to give your life to me, you're actually out of touch with reality. You don't know what wisdom is. You don't have that clarity. Your car is all frosted over.

[18 : 03] Without Jesus, you are missing out on the greatest thing that you were made for. That is a radically humbling thing. To accept that the source of all our wellness, the source of all our joy, resides outside myself.

And that's especially true in our culture that's obsessed with wellness, with bringing the greatest good into our life. Pride wants to control our own life and destiny.

It says, I know what's best for my well-being. You know, it's the slogan you hear in Vancouver, Your best life now. It's my right. I will not entrust myself to another.

I will not surrender and believe myself to Jesus. Now, that unbelief affects each of us, whether you're a follower of Jesus, or if you are somebody who do not believe in Jesus yet.

John Stott once wrote a great essay called Pride, Humility, and God. He gets to the heart of what is true. This is from a book, by the way, edited by Jim Packer called Alive to God.

[19 : 15] He says this. He says, Very true.

That is what Jesus is teaching. So how can we deal with this pride? How can we believe? Well, Jesus tells us at the end of verse 19, there's this little phrase there.

It says this. Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds. That was a puzzling line when I was going through this passage.

Those words seem a bit out of place. But when you see that, and you have to think about it, often it's because it's a very important teaching. It's a crucial thing that we need to pay attention to.

That's the case here. Because what Jesus is basically saying here is that the way that you can believe is to put yourself into the place of listening to the wisdom of God.

[20 : 25] Do you put yourself in the place of listening to the wisdom of God? Romans 10, 17 says, Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Well, the word of Christ is wisdom. John promising that the Messiah is coming and to get ready for that, that is God's wisdom. Jesus' teaching, his preaching, is God's wisdom.

Jesus himself is God's wisdom. It is his mission that is God's wisdom. And the wisdom is vindicated, Jesus says.

It is justified by her deeds. And that means that wisdom will be shown to be reality when Jesus dies on a cross as a sacrifice for sin and then rises in power to give his life to all who will believe.

That's where the song of grief, of the awfulness of sin that we all suffer from and mourning for that sin, that's where the song of grief and the joyful dance of life and hope and celebration at what God does for us comes together.

[21 : 44] That's the wisdom of God, and you see it together in the cross. God's wisdom, which the world could not imagine, is that Jesus takes away our sin and completely and abundantly gives us his life, his grace, brings us into that feast, the wedding feast and the banquet.

And he invites you and I to this banquet without reservation because he loves you. That is the gospel. That is the wisdom of God revealed in Jesus.

And he wants all of your life at that banquet. Including the parts that our pride wants to keep to ourselves. The great Welsh preacher, Martin Lloyd-Jones, often preached about pride.

And I talked to somebody at the early service who used to go in an hour every day to London, every Sunday, to hear him preach. And he said, yes, he said, often he spoke about pride.

And he said this quote, which I found very helpful. He quoted a great hymn about pride, which you'll recognize. He said, when I survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died, my richest gain, I count but loss, and I pour contempt on all my pride.

[23 : 06] And Jones said, nothing else can do it. When I see that I am a sinner, that nothing but the son of God on the cross can save me, I am humbled to the dust.

Nothing but the cross can give me a spirit of humility. And that humility is where our belief can come into our lives and fill our lives.

It's here at the cross where belief begins. It's where the enemy pride is crushed out of us. And it's where we find our great friend humility so that we can believe in Jesus and surrender ourselves to him for our perfect well-being.

So as we leave this passage, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Amen.