

John's Gospel - Understanding Unbelief

by John Vissers

The sermon explores the reasons for unbelief, including the sovereignty of God and the cost of discipleship, and emphasizes the importance of prayer and dependence on God in addressing unbelief.

Duration: 34:38

Scripture: Isaiah 6:10, Isaiah 53:1, Mark 4:12, John 12:37, Romans 10:16

Topics: "Unbelief"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the purpose of parables in the Bible, specifically in Mark chapter 4 and verse 12. He explains that parables are not meant to make things clear, but rather to hide the depth of the revelation and harden hearts. The preacher also references Isaiah 53:1 and Romans 10:16 to highlight the reality of unbelief among the Jews. He emphasizes that God's purpose in election will stand and that faith is a gift that some people have not received. The sermon concludes with a prayer for God to prepare the hearts of the listeners to receive His Word.

Transcript

It is a long weekend in Toronto, and those of you who are here represent the faithful remnant. So welcome tonight to our evening service. Tonight I'm going to be concluding our study in John's Gospel.

Although we haven't come to the end of John's Gospel, we are coming tonight to the end of the 12th chapter, and next Sunday evening I'm going to be returning to some of the Psalms. And so tonight we come to the end of our study in John's Gospel, and in fact, we come tonight to a very difficult passage and a hard teaching, really. And so let us hear the Word of God as we look at it together in John chapter 12, and we're reading at verse 37 through to the end of the chapter at verse 50.

Hear the Word of God. Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet, Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For this reason, they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere, he has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn, and I would heal them.

Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him. Yet at the same time, many even among the leaders believed in him, but because of the Pharisees, they would not confess their faith, for fear they would be put out of the synagogue, for they loved praise from men more than praise from God.

Then Jesus cried out, when a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me.

When he looks at me, he sees the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. As for the person who hears my words, but does not keep them, I do not judge him, for I did not come to judge the world, but to save it.

There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words. That very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day, for I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that this command leads to eternal life, so whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.

Amen. May God bless to us this reading from his word tonight. Let's pray together.

Prepare our hearts, O Lord, this night to receive your word and silence within us any voice but your own voice, that hearing your word we may also obey your will for our lives. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

I'd like to begin tonight by doing something a little different and not something we normally do in our evening service here at Knox Church, at least not during the sermon time. I'd like to begin by asking you a question, and I'd like to give you an opportunity to take a couple of minutes just at the beginning here for some of you to respond to this question. I'm going to ask Linda to come to the front here and to just record on the whiteboard some of the answers as they come.

So if you'd like to respond to this question, we'll give you a moment to think about it. Just raise your hand or stand to your feet and speak loudly and clearly. This is the question.

Why do some people not believe? Why do some people not believe? What are the reasons for unbelief? We live in a world, of course, where we bump up against people in our world all the time, and you meet them every day, people who do not believe, people who are not part of the church, people who are not part of the Christian community, people who do not confess Christ as Lord. And so my question is, why is that the case? Why do some people not believe? Viola. Some people don't believe because they have never heard.

Okay, a very good answer. Some don't believe because they have never heard the gospel. Some others, yes.

Okay, some people don't believe because their hearts are hardened. God has hardened their hearts. Okay, Mary Jane.

Okay, so some people blame God or are disappointed with God because of the hardships of their lives, difficulties, challenges, whatever. Okay, very good. Yes.

They've been brainwashed to believe that they've come from the mud. Okay, so a kind of a worldview that just excludes God. People have been raised in a worldview that just dismisses God or puts God out of the picture.

Okay, Rick. Unrepentant. Okay, unrepentant.

Okay, so some people don't believe because they refuse to repent. Okay, at the back, yes. I'm sorry, I missed that.

Okay, some who don't want to change their lifestyle. They realize that to believe would require, demand something. Dawn.

Okay, too much pride. Very good. Too much pride to believe.

Pekong. Okay, people don't believe because they've been told all their lives there is no God. Yes, Catherine.

Some people believe something else. Okay, they will have some sort of faith or some sort of religion, but not necessarily in Christ. Ed, here.

Too costly. Okay, because it's too costly, the cost of following. Yes, at the back.

A big myth. Yes, okay, some people think the gospel is a myth. A big myth, which is untrue.

Bruce. Okay, some people can't make sense of it. Can't make sense of the gospel or make sense of the Bible.

Gene. Humanitarian. Okay, and that they are basically good and their own goodness is enough.

A lot of good answers here, my goodness. Yes. Okay, some people want evidence.

They want to taste, touch, see before they will place their faith in God. David. Okay, so faith is a gift.

Okay, so some people have not received that gift. Okay, it was Damian. Yes.

Some people don't want to believe because they don't want to. Very good. Yes, that's right.

Well, we're going to come back to that tonight. They don't want, they will not. Yes, okay.

Okay, lots of, yes. Okay, some people are turned off by Christians. Okay, Linda, thank you.

I think we've got lots of answers up there, and you can see that they're already just from within our own congregation tonight, all kinds of reasons that we might have before us for unbelief, why some people believe and others don't believe. Now, I think it's important for us to be sensitive to the reasons for unbelief among your friends and among colleagues as you seek to be a witness for Christ. You can only effectively be a witness if you take seriously the objections that people have or when you begin to understand the particular issues in the life of a friend or a family member or a colleague.

But what I want to suggest to you tonight is that we also need to understand how the Bible understands unbelief. And that brings us to the 12th chapter of John's Gospel, and some of the reasons that have been mentioned here are reasons that appear in the 12th chapter of John's Gospel. So let's just turn there and refocus our attention a little bit and think into this passage.

The 12th chapter of John's Gospel ends with a description of the unbelief of the religious leaders. Now, this comes at the end of John's account of Jesus' public ministry. That's what's being described in verses 37 to 50.

This is the kind of last description of Jesus' public ministry. From this point on in John's Gospel, the focus now changes. The public ministry of Jesus has come or is coming to an end.

And in John 13, the next chapter through to the end of 16, what we find is Jesus meeting with his disciples in the upper room. And in those chapters we have what is called the upper room discourse, where Jesus is teaching his disciples just before he went to the cross. And then in John chapter 17, we're led into a conversation between Jesus and his father as Jesus is interceding before his father in prayer, and we're led into that private relationship between Jesus and his father.

And then in chapters 18 to 21, John records the trial and the cross and the resurrection and the appearances of Jesus. So these verses bring us to the end, in John's Gospel at least, of Jesus' public ministry. Now, what I want you to note is that the public ministry of Jesus, as it's recorded in John's Gospel, ends on a note of unbelief.

And it ends on a note of unbelief, the unbelief of the religious leaders. And the unbelief of the religious leaders indeed has been a motif throughout the Gospel of John. These are the people, John says, who should have believed.

These are the people who should have welcomed Jesus as the Messiah. These are the people who were witnesses to the Word becoming flesh, the eternal Son of God stepping into our space in time, this revelation. But John says they did not welcome him.

They did not believe in him. They did not receive him. They, in fact, rejected him, and they refused to believe.

Way back in John chapter 1, he came to his own, but his own did not receive him. Why do some people believe and others not believe? Why do some people who have been given the privilege of being raised in a Bible-believing church, the privilege of having been raised in a Christian family, the wonderful opportunity of having been exposed to the means of grace, why do such people sometimes not believe? That's really what these verses are about. And people may believe for all kinds of reasons, and we have many of them here on the board.

There may be all kinds of psychological and emotional and cultural reasons as to why people end up not believing. But John, here in chapter 12, at the end of this chapter and at the end of public ministry, the public ministry of Jesus, gives us two reasons, and it's those two reasons I briefly want to look at tonight. And it's interesting that neither of these reasons really has to do with whether it's reasonable to believe.

Neither of the issues is really whether it's reasonable to believe. So let's look at these two reasons for unbelief briefly together tonight. First of all, I want you to notice that Jesus has been rejected because God willed it.

You heard me right. Jesus has been rejected because God willed it. The first reason to present itself, to confront us in this passage, is astonishing.

One of the reasons for unbelief is profoundly theological. Unbelief is the result of the sovereign will of God. John says that nothing can escape the all-embracing purposes of God, not even unbelief.

Now, stay with me here. We usually think of unbelief as something which is contrary to the will of God, and therefore beyond the will of God, beyond the power of God. But John here says, as he records this, and as

Jesus is giving this teaching here, but as John explains it, John says the opposite is true.

Unbelief is an expression, really, if we understand it rightly, of the will of God. Unbelief is not something over which God has no control. Unbelief itself is a response to the sovereign God.

Unbelief itself is an expression of the will of God. Now, do you remember way back in the Psalms, the psalmist says, the fool has said in his heart there is no God. Now, I don't know whether you've ever thought about this, but why is such a person a fool? Why does the psalmist say, the fool has said in his heart there is no God? Is it simply because they do not believe? I don't think so, although that may be part of it.

It is because they don't realize that even their unbelief is a response to the reality of God. Even their unbelief must be some sort of an expression of belief in a strange sort of a way in order to deny the reality of God. Now, I can tell that some of you are getting nervous the deeper I dig into this.

You see, we don't understand how this can be. It runs against our worldview. It runs against the way that we understand things.

But notice that John does not back off. He does not hesitate to affirm this. Notice how he states it.

Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe. These people saw Jesus. They experienced Jesus.

They knew something about Jesus. They witnessed the miracles of Jesus. They didn't need to be persuaded in any sort of a way that Jesus was a reality, but they would not accept the fact that he was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, the Word made flesh.

And John quotes two passages from Isaiah to explain this phenomenon. And notice what he quotes. The second text that he cites is Isaiah 610.

He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts so that they can neither see with their eyes nor understand with their hearts nor turn and I would heal them. Now, this text from Isaiah refers to the prophet's call to proclaim the Word of God, even though the result of the prophet's ministry will be the hardening of the people's hearts against the message. Nevertheless, the prophet is called to proclaim the Word, even though in the end it will result not in belief, but in unbelief.

And the same passage is used in a similar way to account for the failure of Jesus' listeners to comprehend the parables of the kingdom. Do you remember in Mark 4, in verse 12, we have this very strange idea where the parables, which we usually think of as nice little stories which are given to make things clear, the parables are actually given to hide the depth of the riches of the revelation, to conceal, to harden hearts. Now, the other text that's cited here is Isaiah 53.1. Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed.

Now, Paul, in Romans chapter 10, verse 16, refers to this passage along with others to describe the reality of unbelief among the Jews. And in Romans 9, Paul makes the point clear. God's purpose in election, Paul says, will stand.

God calls whom God will call. God will have mercy on whom God will have mercy. And God will harden whom God will harden.

And God will have compassion on whom God will have compassion. It does not, Paul says, depend on desire or effort, but on God's mercy. What he's saying is that faith, in the end, belief is a gift of a gracious God.

So we need to understand that God is never excluded from the response that people make to his claims upon them. Just as God acts to enable and support the faith of those who believe, so God is active even in the response of those who choose the path of unbelief. A hard saying, a hard teaching.

And here's the rub, and here's the mystery, because the reality is the Bible makes it very clear that this does not get us off the hook. The Bible makes it clear that this does not eliminate human responsibility. Later on, at the end of the passage, in verses 47 to 50, in fact, Jesus makes it very clear that unbelief stands under the judgment of God.

How can this be? What John wants us to understand is, on the one hand, you have the sovereignty of God at work, and yet at the same time, there is this reality of our human responsibility. No one can ever say, I don't believe because God wills it. In fact, this is an absurd statement because, of course, it implies belief itself, and no one can ever stand in judgment over another person and say, you will never believe because God wills it.

This is presumptuous. It is not something we can know in any individual case. And yet, the truth stands.

Unbelief, when all is said and done, can only really be understood in terms of the sovereign will of God, the mystery of God's redemptive purposes. Unbelief, you see, itself is profoundly theological in that it has to do with God, not just our emotions and our minds and our wills. It has to do with the reality of sin, which blinds us, and the sovereign will of God, which embraces us even in our sin and unbelief.

God used the unbelief of the religious leaders in the first century to accomplish his purposes for salvation, for the redemption of the world. It's a mystery. We've seen before in earlier passage how Jesus goes to the cross because of the devising of men, the scheming of those who wanted to eliminate him, and yet at the same time, it's all in accordance with the sovereign will of God.

I can't explain this to you in any adequate way, but I can point you to the fact that this is what the Bible says. This is what the Bible teaches. And we need to understand, and this is the application, we need to understand in a very real and profound way that if we're going to tackle unbelief, we're not going to undo it by coming up simply with better arguments, as important as apologetics might be.

We're not going to undo unbelief by becoming more seeker-sensitive, as important as it may be to reach out to others in a sensitive and winsome manner. Unbelief is not undone simply by devising better strategies and more effective programs for evangelism, although those are very important. Unbelief, when all is said and done, is undone by God alone.

It is only undone by the Spirit of God. And what that ought to do, my friends, is drive us to our knees in prayer for brothers and sisters and family members and friends and colleagues who may give all of these kinds of reasons for unbelief, but in the end, it will only be undone by the Spirit of God at work in their lives, giving them the gift of faith. That's why we call faith a gift.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, and what a great day to pray for the unsaved, that you know that the Spirit would descend upon them and bring them to Christ. C.S. Lewis, in his book *God in the Dark*, writes this. He says, In Hamlet, a branch breaks and Ophelia is drowned.

Did she die because the branch broke or because Shakespeare wanted her to die at that point in the play? C.S. Lewis says either, both, whichever you prefer. The alternative suggested by the question is not a real alternative at all, once you have grasped that Shakespeare is making the whole play. You see, what we need to understand is that when we grasp this reality, it gives us a truly biblical worldview, a Christian understanding of evangelism, a Christian understanding of preaching the gospel, a Christian understanding of the world in which we live, that it's not either or, but both and, in the sense that God is sovereign and embraces in a way that we can never understand the fullness and the reality of the universe which he has created.

And when it comes to matters of faith, things are far more complicated than the way we often present them in the church. It ought to drive us to our knees in prayer for those who do not believe. It ought to make us utterly and absolutely dependent on God in all that we do.

A hard saying. But then there's a second reason that I want you to notice in this passage, and that is that Jesus is rejected because the cost of discipleship is too high. The second reason for the unbelief of the religious leaders is a little easier, I think, for us to wrap our minds around.

John says that some of the religious leaders believed in Jesus, but because of the Pharisees, they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue, for they loved the praise of men more than praise from God. There were those who had faith, but their faith somehow was dormant, and they somehow wanted it to stay that way. And then there were some, no doubt, who refused to believe altogether because they were afraid of what others might think.

They were afraid of what it might cost them. In order to follow Jesus, they recognized that it was going to cost something in terms of prestige and power and position and place in society. They might lose the respect that others had for them.

They might have to give up their security. They might lose their tax breaks. The price was simply too high.

Faith and obedience and discipleship in terms of Jesus was a price they were simply not prepared to pay. And I want to suggest to you that this is perhaps one of the most significant reasons why people refuse to believe today. There's lots of people who want to believe, but they want to believe in their own way, and they want to believe in their own terms.

There's lots of us who want to be secret disciples, and we want to believe in Jesus in a way that makes us comfortable, but doesn't challenge us or push us out of those comfort zones. We want, as we've seen time and time again throughout the Gospel of John, there's always those who want a Jesus who fits into their worldview, who fits into the way that we understand the world rather than allowing that Jesus to challenge us. Some of us want a faith that simply makes us feel good, but the reality is that faith in the Bible, saving faith, includes obedience.

Faith in the Bible includes discipleship. The fact of the matter is that we don't really want that kind of faith, that kind of belief. In fact, we really don't want a faith at all, at least not a faith that's described like it is in the New Testament, a faith that really grabs hold and transforms our lives, that makes a difference, that binds us to Christ in life and in death, no matter what the cost.

See, faith without obedience and faith without discipleship is not much different than outright unbelief. Let me say that again. Faith without obedience and faith without discipleship is not much different from

outright unbelief.

But of course, isn't that the kind of faith that we like to preach about in the evangelical church today? We like to preach about the love of God without talking about the justice of God. We like to preach about salvation without talking about judgment. We like to preach about faith without talking about obedience and discipleship.

And the fact of the matter is, the problem is that many of us don't really understand the nature of saving faith, and so we end up blurring the distinction between belief and unbelief altogether. The Westminster Confession of Faith says this, it says, that saving faith is that grace of faith whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the salvation of their souls. This is a work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word.

This faith trusts in the promises of God and results in repentance and obedience. One of my favorite lines in all of Christian literature that was written in the 20th century is the line from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Written in 1933, 12 years before Bonhoeffer himself died as a martyr just near the end of the Second World War, he said this, when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.

When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. And so in a very real sense, you see, what this passage does is it uncovers for us the reality, the nature of saving faith, that it's a work of the sovereign God, that it always includes repentance and obedience and discipleship. And when you understand the nature of saving faith from a biblical perspective, then you begin to understand something about unbelief as well and how unbelief can be.

There may be all kinds of reasons why people do not believe, but underneath all of the intellectual reasons and underneath all of the cultural reasons and underneath all of the emotional reasons and underneath all of the moral reasons and underneath all of the psychological reasons, there is this reality. The sovereignty of God and the call to faith and repentance and obedience. You see, we need to get out of the idea, which is prevalent in our culture, that faith and belief is just another consumer choice.

It's just another thing that we get to choose, just like we choose whatever brand of toothpaste we're going to use. And often we think about it in the exact same way. But faith has to do with the sovereignty of God.

Belief and unbelief. It has to do with repentance of sin. It has to do with obedience to the will of God.

What I want to say to you, my friends, I mean, it's hard to preach out of a passage like this. It's hard to preach a message like this, but what I want to say is that when you grasp this reality, when you grasp the depth of the grace of a sovereign God, then you begin to understand that the gospel is really good news. Because God does for us what we could never do for ourselves.

Salvation is by grace, through faith, through belief, not of works, not of ourselves, lest any of us should boast. And so I want you to go out tonight with that note ringing in your ears. The grace of a sovereign God who gives the gift of faith.

Let's pray. Lord, who can understand the depth and the fullness and the riches of your gospel. I confess my own weakness of mind and understanding and yet your word points us in these directions and we ask for your spirit to teach us that we might not only understand with our minds, but that we might live and experience and know and will and do all that is in accordance with your will.

Lord, there may even be someone tonight here who does not believe. Grant by your spirit the gift of faith this night and grant all of us a renewal of our faith that we might in turn share that faith with others, with those who do not believe and you by your grace might you use our words of witness to draw men and women and young people and children to yourself. For the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray.

Amen.

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