

# Blind Unbelief

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Let's turn in our Bibles, friends, to John's Gospel, chapter 12. If you were here last week, you may remember that I explained we were having a short series, just three Wednesdays, last week and this week and then next week, on the later part of John, chapter 12. Last week we were looking at verses 27 to 36. This week we're going to be looking at 36 to 43 and then in a week's time, God willing, 44 to the end. So let me read just that short passage halfway through verse 36 to the end of verse 43. In our church Bibles, you'll see it's been given the title and a good title, the unbelief of the people. So John 12, 36.

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 word 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? 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. Amen. This is the word of the Lord.

Well, now this little passage I've just read serves as a kind of interlude when John the evangelist steps back from the action that he's been describing in his gospel. There's been a lot of action even in chapter 12 already. If you look back to the earlier verses, you'll see that in the first little section there, Jesus has dinner with Martha and Mary and Lazarus, who's just been raised from the dead.

That's the first eight verses or so. We then have the triumphal entry on the donkey into Jerusalem in verses 12 to 19. We then have some Greeks coming to see Jesus who request one of his disciples, Philip. So we wish to see Jesus in verse 20. And then we have some words of Jesus where he explains various things to these Greeks and to his disciples. So there's been plenty of action. And then it's as though John stops. He steps back and he puts in some telling reflections of his own on the difficult and sad question of why so many of the Jews who met Jesus and saw his mighty works still refused to believe in him. And you can sense John's sadness in verse 37. Though Jesus had done so many signs before them in their very presence, they still did not believe in him. So what I want to do in today's Bible talk is to think about this problem or phenomenon of unbelief. Why is it that some people, when they're confronted with the message about Jesus, say, yes, of course, obviously it's true.

[ 3 : 38 ] I must become a believer. Whereas other people, hearing exactly the same message about exactly the same Savior, respond by saying, no, I don't want him. Why do some people become believers and why do others not? It's a question that's obviously important to us today. And let me point out one thing first of all, so as to clarify what we're talking about. The issue here for John the evangelist is not atheism as opposed to belief in God. These Jewish people that John is writing about here in verse 37, were not atheists. If you'd asked them, do you believe in God? They would immediately have said, of course we do. We're Jews of the stock of Abraham. Of course we believe in God. We're monotheists.

We believe that the only true God is the God of Israel. And we believe that he is sending a Messiah to us to be our deliverer and to be our king. But we don't believe that Jesus is that Messiah. See how John puts it in verse 37. They still did not believe in him, that is to say, in Jesus.

They certainly believed in God, but they didn't believe in Jesus. So John means by that that they didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, or that he was the divine son of God. So the issue here is not atheism as opposed to belief in the existence of God. Of course, that question is also an important question for us today, but it's not the question that John is dealing with here. His question is about the many people, most of them Jewish people, who saw Jesus, who saw his mighty works, and yet rejected him. They refused to believe that he was the Christ.

Now let me set this question in a slightly broader context. The rejection of Jesus as Messiah, the rejection of him as Messiah by many of the Jews back in the first century, was a source of great sadness and great perplexity to the apostles. The apostles were themselves Jews, and they were convinced to the ultimate degree that Jesus was the Messiah promised in their scriptures.

They began to perceive this dimly during his three years of public ministry. You remember that dramatic moment which is told for us in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Mark chapter 8, for example, when Jesus says to his disciples, who do you say that I am? And Peter blurts it straight out, you are the Christ. Now their understanding of him at that point is still very blurred and confused, and it remains that way right up to Jesus's crucifixion. But as soon as he's been raised from the dead, and the apostles have been given the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they are then utterly convinced, and they begin to preach Jesus fearlessly.

[ 6 : 30 ] This Jesus, they said in Jerusalem, whom you crucified, God has raised from the dead, therefore repent and put your trust in him. That was their message. It's still our message, of course. It's the same message today.

And in those early days in Jerusalem and immediately around about, thousands of Jewish people did become believers, Christians. They believed the message that Jesus was the promised Christ. And then after only a very few years, many Gentiles from further afield also began to turn to Jesus. But, and here is the sadness and the perplexity, many Jews on hearing this message about Jesus, not only refused to put their trust in him, but in many cases they opposed the gospel message violently. Think of Paul. Initially, he was a ferocious opponent of the gospel. He was a kind of religious terrorist who fiercely persecuted the church until, of course, he was wonderfully converted. And then when Paul began to travel around the Mediterranean world, preaching this gospel to Jews and Gentiles, it was the Jews particularly, he had trouble from Gentiles too, but it was particularly the Jews who locked him up, had him beaten and stoned and who treated him as if he was the scum of the earth. And I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that the apostles really broke their hearts over this. These Jewish apostles, Jewish apostles, they knew that Jesus was the Christ. They knew to the very depth of their being what a wonderful thing it was to be a Christian, to be saved, to be rescued from hell, to be put on the road to eternal life.

And they said to each other, how can it be that so many of our fellow Jews cannot and will not see the truth about our Lord Jesus? Now, if you know your epistle to the Romans, you'll know that Paul the apostle wrestles with this particular question painfully in chapters 9, 10, and 11. It's a difficult section of Romans, but it's well worth studying because Paul shed so much light on this particular problem in those three chapters. But John is also wrestling with this problem right the way through his gospel. And our little passage for today is like a little slice out of Romans 9, 10, and 11.

But John's sadness over Jewish unbelief, that's something that runs right the way through the gospel. He says, for example, famous words back in chapter 1, he came to his own people, the Jews, and his own people did not receive him. And now for the next 12 chapters, John shows us Jesus often locked in debate and argument with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, until we reach the moment in chapter 11, verse 53, 1153, where we read, from that day on, they, that's the Jewish leaders, made plans to put Jesus to death. So in our passage here in John 12 today, John is standing back from the action just for a brief moment. And he's teaching his readers, teaching us how to understand this phenomenon of why the Jewish people by and large rejected their Messiah and refused to put their trust in him and submit to his lordship. Now our situation here today in Scotland is slightly different. Most of us, I guess, come from and live in a largely Gentile culture. But the phenomenon, the strange question of why some people become Christians and others don't, that's just the same for us today as it was in Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago. So let's see how John can help us to understand this problem in terms of our own situation today. I think we can sum up the problem by looking at two key phrases in our passage. Look with me first at verse 37, the end of the verse.

They did not, they still did not believe in him. Then secondly, verse 39, they could not believe.

[10:40] They did not believe. They could not believe. Now, are you picking up the scent? Verse 37 is clearly showing that these people who did not put their trust in Christ were wrong not to put their trust in Christ. Look at the way John expresses himself. The implication, I think, is unmistakable. Though Jesus had done so many signs, so many miracles before them, they still did not believe in him. That is to say they were culpable. They were wrong. They had no excuse. One of the big purposes of Jesus' miracles or signs was to show people who he was, to give them a glimpse of his veiled but glorious identity so that they should put their trust in him. Think of the very first of his miracles recorded back in John chapter 2. That's the miracle where Jesus turned a large quantity of water into wine at a wedding banquet. And John concludes his account of the water being turned into wine by saying, this, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana of Galilee and manifested his glory and his disciples believed in him. So the miracle revealed something of his glory and the response was to put their trust in him. But by the time we get to John 12, verse 37,

Jesus has performed seven great signs and still lots of people are refusing to believe in him. They're in the wrong. They're culpable. That's John's point. And in the next verse, in verse 38, he explains that this phenomenon of widespread unbelief was prophesied some 700 years previously by Isaiah. Lord, who has believed what he heard from us and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

Answer, not many have believed. Not many have taken our message on board. So John is saying this phenomenon of widespread refusal to believe in God's message runs right across the centuries. It is somehow endemic in the human race. There's something deep in the human character that wants to say no to God, even when the message is so persuasive. Now, friends, let's bring this down to our own lives.

I know that many folk here, I guess the great majority, are Christian people. If you are a Christian, think back to the time when you were converted, when you became a Christian. Some of you may not be able to put your finger on a particular moment, perhaps because you were brought up in a Christian family and you had Christian parents and you can never remember a time when you were consciously not a Christian. You took in the gospel with your mother's milk. But many of us, including myself, can remember a period of wrestling with the claims of Christ and being, quite frankly, in a state of conflict about Christ. And for myself, I remember thinking, yes, Christ is the truth and I can see that he is summoning me to follow him, but I don't want to.

I don't want to surrender to him. I don't want to run up the white flag because I want to keep control of my own life. Now, that's always the issue for people, isn't it? Who is going to be in charge? Is it going to be Christ or is it going to be me? C.S. Lewis put it colorfully when writing about his conversion, and this was many years after he'd become a Christian. He said, I didn't want the divine interferer. I think he spelt that with a capital I. I didn't want the divine interferer to come and interfere with my plans and ambitions. I wanted autonomy. I didn't want to yield control to somebody else. Now, isn't that always the issue for people? People will sometimes pretend that there are other dominant issues. Let's say intellectual difficulties. For example, they might say, how is it possible that Jesus can be fully divine and fully human? I can't get my mind around that.

[ 14 : 44 ] Or they might say, but surely biology and physics and chemistry have explained all the difficulties. Now, those are important questions. They need to be addressed. But what keeps people from becoming Christians, generally speaking, is not intellectual difficulties, but the problem of submitting one's own will to the will of Christ. Now, when you do, it is such a relief and it is such a joy.

But many people come to that crossroads in life and they refuse. They say, I can't, I won't. It's going to interfere with my life to become a Christian. Of course, it will interfere with our lives very much.

It will interfere in the following way. You will find joy rather than sadness. You'll find purpose rather than drift. You'll find a sound moral basis for life rather than the old stale immoralities, which promise so much but give so little. You'll find joy in the Bible. You'll find joy in the Christian fellowship. And in the end, you will find heaven rather than hell. And yet, you may still say, I don't want Christ because I want to keep my own hand on the tiller. Verse 37, it's a sad verse.

John is saying they had so much evidence in front of them, so many signs and wonders done before them, but still they did not believe and they were responsible for their unbelief. But now look on to verse 39. Therefore, they could not believe. And again, John quotes from the prophet Isaiah.

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. Now, when we put verse 37, they did not believe, alongside verse 39, they could not believe, our minds begin to sense a problem of understanding.

[ 16 : 44 ] We say, verse 37 shows that their unbelief was their responsibility. But verse 39 seems to be suggesting that their unbelief was God's doing, God's responsibility. In fact, if God has hardened their hearts and blinded their eyes, surely you can't blame the people for their unbelief. It's God's fault. Now, how do we grapple with this? How do we understand it? It seems illogical to us. It seems to be contradictory. Well, let me put it like this. The Bible itself never shows the slightest embarrassment in speaking either of human responsibility or of God's sovereign control.

The Bible speaks of both these realities in full-on terms. The Bible teaches that people are fully responsible for the way that we respond to Christ's summons to come and submit to him. But at the same time, the ability to come to Christ is something given by God. Perhaps we could just turn back to John chapter 6 for a moment to see how this is illustrated here. John chapter 6.

Let's look at verse 35. We're on page 892. Verse 35. Jesus said to them, this is the crowds, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. Now, just notice that word whoever. It's a very big word in John's vocabulary. It's a word of appeal to any person who has ears to hear. Whoever comes to me, whoever believes in me. So in a verse like this, Jesus is commanding and summoning the world to come to him. And the responsibility clearly lies with the hearer. Now look on to verse 37. Next verse.

Sorry, next but one. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me, I will never cast out. So those who come to Christ do so because they have been sovereignly given to Christ by the Father. And then look on to verse 44. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. Now that verse really puts the two sides of this question together. The Father shows his sovereignty by drawing a person to Christ. But that person still has to come to Christ. God enables that person's will, but that person still has to exercise his will. Now the point for us to notice is this. Jesus shows not the slightest embarrassment here in John chapter 6 in speaking of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in one breath. He is teaching us that both are true. God is fully sovereign in drawing people to Christ. And men and women are fully responsible for the way that we react to the summons of the gospel. Now to our limited minds, the thing just doesn't quite seem to fit together logically. So the Christian person has to reach a point of saying to the Lord something like this.

Lord, your understanding is far greater than mine and your logic is far more profound and comprehensive than mine ever could be. But I'm happy to accept the Bible's teaching that no human response to Christ takes place outside your sovereign control, but equally that every human being is thoroughly responsible for what he does with the summons of Christ to submit to him. So the Bible's way and this is not just in the teaching of Jesus, but from every book from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible's way is to assert the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of human beings.

[ 20 : 53 ] Both of those doctrines are taught full strength. You might say 100% proof. It's not 50% of one and 50% of the other. It's not God is partially sovereign. What kind of a God would he be if he were partially sovereign?

And it's not. Man is partially responsible. What kind of a half-baked creature would man be if man were only partially responsible to God? We're fully responsible. And there's a clear message, going back to John 12, there's a clear message there in verse 37 for any person today who's not a Christian.

And that may include somebody here. Look at verse 37. The message is, look carefully at the signs, these great miracles of Jesus that John has recorded in his gospel, and put your trust in Jesus.

Stake everything on him for this world and for the world to come. It's the only way to find out what our human life is really for. We were made for this. We were made for fellowship with Christ. And until we come to him, our life is unhinged and alienated from the God who made us and who loves us very dearly.

Now, friends, let's take a final moment to look at verses 42 and 43. Because these two verses bring a message to the person who is wanting to follow Christ, but is frightened of the opinion of other people. Let me read the verses again. 42. Nevertheless, many, even of the Jewish authorities, believed in him. But for fear of the Pharisees, they did not confess it. They kept quiet, kept their mouths shut, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue. For they loved the glory, the honor, if you like, that comes from man, more than the glory that comes from God.

[ 22 : 44 ] Now, we know that in God's sight, a person either is a Christian or is not a Christian. There's no third category. There's no sort of person who is a half Christian. But on the ground here in human life and the complexities of human life, it is possible to be like the people of verses 42 and 43.

These people were clearly senior Jewish people. John calls them people of the authorities, perhaps Jewish priests or other community leaders. But they were frightened. They were fearful that if they openly confessed their trust in Christ, they would be put out of the synagogue by the ruling Pharisees who were very anti-Jesus. And John diagnoses their malady in verse 43. He says, they valued being praised and honored by men more than they valued God's opinion and God's glory. So John's message to such people is very clear. He's saying, don't be like that. Take the risk, launch out and trust Christ and don't be frightened to confess it. The figure of Nicodemus is quite prominent in John's gospel. And you'll remember that he's first introduced to us in John chapter three as a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, and an important teacher, a kind of professor of theology. But Nicodemus clearly becomes a real follower of Jesus. By the time we get to chapter seven in John's gospel, he's prepared to stand up for Jesus in a debate with other Pharisees. And by the time we get to chapter 19, when Jesus has been crucified, Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea, has the courage to go to Pontius Pilate and ask for the body of Jesus so that they can bury it. So John the evangelist commends Nicodemus as a Pharisee who was prepared to risk his reputation and his membership of the Jewish hierarchy for the sake of Jesus.

But by contrast, here in verse 42, we have the fearful ones, those who believe in Christ at one level, but are not willing to go the whole hog. And John's message is, friends, you can't live the Christian life like that. Now for us today, it's not the synagogue that we fear being put out of, but it could be some other circle of friends whose good opinion we value highly. We value perhaps too highly the members of the golf club or the bridge circle, maybe the men that we watch football with on a Saturday afternoon. Do these people know that we're disciples of Christ? Or do we keep quiet about Christ because we don't want them to scorn us or exclude us? John's message is absolutely plain.

He says to all of us, risk everything. Cast caution to the winds. Value God's approval above man's approval. Be an unashamed Christian. Well, friends, time is up, but let's go away with two messages from this short passage. First, John speaks to the unbeliever. And his message, really in verse 37, is look at the evidence, look at the wonderful words and works of Jesus, which John records in his gospel, and stop being an unbeliever. Come to Christ. It's the only way to live. To be a Christian is what we were made for. And then secondly, John speaks to the fearful believer. And I guess we've all been in positions where we've been fearful believers.

Certainly I have. But he speaks to the fearful believer. And his message is, be courageous. Let your friends, your colleagues, your relatives, everybody that you know who counts, let them all know who your master is. Don't be ashamed of Jesus Christ. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray.

[ 26 : 35 ] Dear God, our Father, we thank you that when the Lord Jesus came to this earth and spent those years with the people, he often said, whoever will believe in me and put his trust in me, that man will have the bread of life and will not be hungry, will have the water of life and will not thirst again.

We thank you so much that these signs recorded in John's gospel are recorded for our benefit, so that we should read of them and be convinced by them and put our trust in the Lord Jesus as Christ and Son of God. Please, therefore, dear Father, strengthen us in our faith. Help us to be men and women who are unashamed of Christ, who are happy always to speak of him to anybody, and who are willing to risk people's bad opinion so that we should stand with Christ. Please strengthen us and help us and fill our hearts this day with fresh confidence in the truth of the gospel. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.