

December 4th, 2016

"I HAVE COME TO SAVE THE WORLD"

John 12:37-50

It is the second Sunday of the Advent season when we remember Jesus' first *coming* into the world. Last week Jesus said in v. 28 "But for this purpose I have *come* to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Jesus came into the world to magnify the worth of His Father.

And He gives us another reason for His coming in our passage this morning. v.47 "I did not *come* to judge the world but to save the world." Jesus Christ came to display the all-surpassing holiness and love of the Father by dying on the cross to save sinners. This is the greatest story ever told.

Yet what we see as Jesus wraps up His public ministry in John 12, is that this comes at the cost of His own people—Israel—completely rejecting Him. John warned us that this would happen in our opening chapter, **John 1:11** "He came to his own [the Jewish people], and his own people did not receive him." This is astonishing! How could a people who have been expecting Messiah for thousands of years, who were entrusted with the oracles of God which prophesied about Him, and gave signs of His coming, *finally* reject Him when He arrived? Skeptics have pointed this out, concluding that Jesus couldn't have been who He said He was.

But this view grossly underestimates the *power of sin* and the *plan of God*. Sin is not simply mistakes that human beings make, a mistake like you would make in your checkbook. No. Sin is *utter* rebellion against God. **Psalm 2:2** "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD [the Father] and against his Anointed [the Son], saying "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." **Sin is wishing God was dead.** So it's no wonder that the Jews would reject Christ. All mankind—Jew and Gentiles—are born under the power of sin.

But this rejection of Christ by the Jewish people was not some cosmic accident. It was the very plan of God. As Peter addressed the Jews at

Pentecost “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, **delivered up according to the definite plan** and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” (Acts 2:22-23).

Jesus could not save the world apart from the cross. And the cross was both the *ultimate sign* of Israel’s rejection of Christ, and the *ultimate fulfillment* of God’s plan to save the world. John is going to unfold these two things by explaining to us why Israel did not believe, and how God planned their unbelief. These two ideas are so interwoven in our text, that I don’t want to break them up in an outline. We will deal with v.37-43 first, and then look to v.44-50 in our application.

The Big Idea...

God planned the rejection of His Son, so that He could be reconciled to sinners

The Unbelief of Israel

Chapter 12 is the end of Jesus’ public ministry. In chapters 13 -17, Jesus pulls away entirely to minister to his disciples, and then when he goes out in public again He is crucified. So these words are very significant, they are the last words that Jesus speaks to the world before His death, burial, and resurrection.

But it is not Jesus who speaks first. He went into hiding in v.36. This is John speaking, and what he gives us is a chilling account of Israel’s unbelief. Recall that when Jesus was just a baby and He was brought into temple to be presented to the Lord, Simeon was there. And he prophesied over Mary saying “Behold, this child is *appointed for the fall* and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed.” (Luke 2:34) From the beginning, Jesus was going to be

opposed. From the beginning, Jesus was appointed for the fall of many in Israel.

And now at the end of Jesus' ministry, John circles back to that chilling truth. **v.37** "Though he [Jesus] had done so many **signs** before them, they still did not believe in him,"¹ Think of all the signs that Jesus has performed. He turned water into wine, He fed the five thousand, He healed a man born blind, He raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus did works that no one else has ever done (**John 15:24**). And John is dumbfounded at Israel's unbelief. "*Though* he had done *so many signs* before them, *they still* did not believe in him." Jesus was the best preacher that ever walked the earth, the best miracle worker that ever walked the earth, and yet His own people would not believe in Him.

Why? Because this is what He was appointed for. Israel would not believe—**v.38** "...*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?" This unbelief of Israel was a *fulfillment of prophecy*. John is quoting Isaiah 53:1. Two verses later, Isaiah sharpens the stick on this unbelief. He says that Christ would be "...**despised** and **rejected** by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces." (Isaiah 53:3). This is the natural disposition of all mankind: unbelief.

That's why Isaiah says "...to whom has the arm of the Lord been **revealed**?" The prophet is asking: "who has God *revealed* Himself to?" In other words, the thing that makes men believe "... is *not their own* [mental faculties]², *but* the revelation of God."³ The gospel can be proclaimed and declared from the rooftops to the whole world, but it will remain hidden to the

¹ This echoes what the Lord said to Moses in Numbers 14:11 "And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the **signs** that I have done among them?"

² original "sagacity"

³ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. XVIII*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: BakerBooks 2009), pg. 41

human heart until God reveals it to them. Left to one's self, man will never believe.

“Winning People to Christ”

And so, it is disheartening to hear a very popular evangelical pastor say: "It is my deep conviction that anybody, anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the felt needs to his or her heart."⁴ That has never been the message of the Bible. Belief in the gospel does not rest upon the ingenuity or cleverness of man. It does not rest upon a preacher's ability, or the hearer's intelligence. It does not rest upon discovering and then meeting the felt needs of unbelievers. "Salvation belongs to the LORD" (Psalm 3:8).

A case in point is from the Exodus. God had miraculously met all the felt needs of His people. He rescued them from slavery in Egypt, provided manna from heaven and water from the rock. And yet Moses says to them in **Deuteronomy 29:2-4** "You have *seen* all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes *saw*, the signs, and those great wonders. **But** to this day *the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.*"

Nobody can be won to Christ unless God gives them eyes to see.

This is how Peter was won to Christ: **Matthew 16:17** "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood *has not* revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."

This is how Paul was won to Christ: **Galatians 1:15-16** God "...had set me apart before I was born, and...called me by his grace, [and] was pleased to reveal his Son to me"

⁴ Rick Warren, The Purpose Driven Church, pg. 219

This is how Lydia was won to Christ: **Acts 16:14** “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”

If you have been won to Jesus Christ, it is not because some preacher discovered your felt needs, or because you have seen some great miracle. If you believe it is because the *Living God* who created the heavens and the earth said “Live!” And the Holy Spirit gave you eyes to see and a heart to love Jesus Christ. Oh the symmetry of this gospel. Jesus began his teaching ministry in John 3 telling Nicodemus “unless [you are] born again [you] cannot see the Kingdom of God.” (**John 3:3**). And now as His public ministry comes to an end, John picks up on the same theme. Jesus’ ministry begins and ends speaking about the necessity of the new birth.⁵ God wants you to feel this. He is absolutely sovereign. And when we feel our utter dependence upon Him in our salvation, He is honored.

Israel did not believe, because the arm of the Lord was not revealed to them.

God planned Israel’s unbelief

But John is going to say more. God had a plan in Israel’s unbelief. John says of them in v. 39-40 “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.” Consider the flow of John’s logic from v.37-40. Four times John points out God’s design in their unbelief.

v.37—Israel wouldn’t believe in spite of all of Jesus’ signs. Why?

v.38—*So that* [1st clue that God planned their unbelief] Isaiah’s word that ‘the arm of the Lord is not revealed to everybody’ would be fulfilled

⁵ As Jesus said in **Matthew 11:27** “...no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to *reveal* him.”

v.39—**Therefore** [2nd clue that God planned their unbelief] they could not believe

v.40—**For** [3rd clue that God planned their unbelief] God blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, **lest** [4th clue that God planned their unbelief] they see, understand, turn and God would heal them.⁶

In other words, these people were rendered *incapable* of believing in Christ. These verses do not allow us to say that God merely foresaw their unbelief. John gives us purpose statements (“so that...therefore...for...lest”). These purpose statements show that God planned Israel’s unbelief.

Perhaps to many of us, these verses paint a harsh portrait of God. As if God is holding the door of heaven shut to those who are knocking, asking to come in. If that’s you, consider that God wants you to wrestle with these ideas to get you to see a bigger truth.

When John says “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts,” he is quoting from Isaiah 6:10.⁷ Isaiah 6 is the throne room scene, where the prophet is given a vision of the the LORD. We know this is Christ because v.41 tells us that is who Isaiah saw. And when Isaiah sees Him, he becomes utterly undone. The sight of Christ’s glory makes him cry out “Woe is me! For I am lost.” After that vision, Christ commissions Him to preach to Israel. **But he is told that nobody will listen to His preaching.** God was going to harden their hearts so that they could not believe. Why? “Because God had made a **judicial verdict** against sinful Israel.”⁸ As a whole, the nation of Israel had continued to rebel against God, time and again, no matter how many prophets He sent them. They did not believe in God and now God was hardening them in their unbelief. This is judicial hardening.

⁶ <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/belief-in-jesus-its-barriers-and-blessings>

⁷ According to W.G.T. Shedd, this is the most quoted O.T. verse in the N.T. It’s quoted in all four gospels and in Acts and Romans.

⁸ R.C. Sproul, *St. Andrew’s Expository Commentary: John*, (Orlando, FL.,: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), pg. 236

This is what John means in our present passage. God is not starting out with neutral human beings. God is blinding eyes and hardening hearts of "...unbelievers who had already rejected the grace of God."⁹ God is hardening in agreement with their own choices. God is not forcing them to sin, nor is He creating any evil in their hearts. The evil is already there.

Consider how **2 Thessalonians 2:9-12** speaks of this judicial hardening: Paul says that those who are perishing are being deceived "...because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. **Therefore** God sends them a *strong delusion*, [this judicial hardening comes after their refusal to love the truth] so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness."¹⁰

Israel's unbelief is joy to the world

If this idea of God hardening Israel's hearts is a struggle for you, consider four things that D.A. Carson offers as a remedy.

- 1) **God's sovereignty in salvation is never pitted against human responsibility.** v.38 tells us that this crowd had many signs done to them, but they refused to believe. And v.43 is going to tell us why—Because they loved the glory of man more than the glory of God.
- 2) **God's hardening is not the capricious manipulation of an arbitrary dictator cursing morally neutral beings.** Rather it is a holy condemnation of a guilty people who are condemned to do and be what they themselves has chosen.
- 3) **God sovereignty in these matters is a cause for hope.** Why do we pray for unbelievers? Don't we ask God to change their hearts? If He is not Lord over every human heart, able to move it where He wills, then it is pointless to pray for the salvation of others.
- 4) **God's sovereign hardening is the stage for ultimate redemption.** This is the truth of our Big Idea: God planned the rejection of His Son, so that He

⁹ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol. XVIII*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: BakerBooks 2009), pg. 43

¹⁰ Also see Romans 1:24, 26, 28; John 3:19-20; Romans 9:18

could be reconciled to sinners. This is Paul's climatic point in Romans 11. "...through [Israel's] trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles...their failure means riches for the Gentiles...[Gentiles] have received mercy because of their disobedience." (v.11, 12, 30).¹¹

Therefore this hardening of Israel's hearts was part of God's plan to save the world. Jesus was crucified for sinners because "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him." God had planned that Jesus would be rejected by Israel so that He could die for sinners like you and me. So this hard text is the ground of everlasting joy. Israel was hardened *so that* Christ would be crucified, *so that* we could be saved, if we believe.

The Root and Responsibility of Unbelief: They loved their own glory

John doesn't simply end there however. He doesn't finish with God hardening Israel's heart. He shows us why on the human level, Israel rejected Christ. Look at v.42-43 "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 loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God."¹²

Within the Jewish leadership, there were many who believed in Jesus, but this belief didn't translate into confession. Commentators are split on whether or not this faith is genuine or false. And I'm not at all sure. If what John is describing here is mere mental assent to the truth claims of Jesus, than this is certainly a false faith. In this light, they loved their own glory—their own position in the synagogue—more than the facts they believe about Jesus. And Jesus already said in **John 5:44** "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?" On the other hand, this might have just been a very weak and infantile faith. No

¹¹ adapted from D.A. Carson's *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), pg.448-449

¹² Back in John 9:22, "...the Jews had already agreed that if anyone would confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue."

doubt many true Christians have not confessed Christ openly before for fear of retribution. Peter himself would deny Christ just a few days from now.

Whether these authorities were really saved or not, I think the main point here is the end of v.43 “**for** they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” This is why Israel, as a whole, did not believe. This is the root of Israel’s unbelief (this is the root of all unbelief): loving the glory of man more than the glory of God.

Israel didn’t believe because they had a glory problem. So let’s try and tie this together. In v.41, John says “Isaiah said these things because he saw *his* glory and spoke of *him*.” Isaiah saw the glory of Christ in the two passages he cited. Isaiah saw the suffering servant from Isaiah 53 (v.38), and the “Holy, holy, holy” Lord on His throne from Isaiah 6 (v.40). Both of these are visions of Christ. But these did not convince Israel to believe. They loved man’s glory more. When Jesus arrives on the scene as a suffering servant, they despised Him, because that’s not glorious. And when He claims to be the “I Am”—equal with the Father, God Himself—they reject Him because he doesn’t play by their rules. God sent them exactly what they needed, but they didn’t believe because they loved their own glory more.

Application

Our Doctrine: All our assets are liabilities before God

I want to focus our attention on v.43 for the first two parts of our application: Loving the glory of man more than the glory of God is the root of unbelief. This “loving the glory of man” here means loving anything that makes much of me, loving anything that elevates me. It can be anything—the car you drive, the sports teams you follow, your reputation at your job, your debt free lifestyle, your theological knowledge, your reputation among your girlfriends, where you live, how nice your house is, what kind of clothes your kids wear,

which friends you hang out with—anything. **Loving the glory of man is finding the source of your joy outside of God.**

What this means is that all of our assets are liabilities when it comes to the gospel. Jesus said “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” Jesus is saying I am the satisfaction of life, come to Me, believe in Me, and you’ll never want again. Why don’t people believe? Because they put Jesus in on side of the scale and all the things they receive joy from on the other side of the scale (their assets) and then they weight them. And those assets become the grounds of unbelief because they would rather have them (whatever they are) than Jesus Christ.

To love the glory of man means that I love my reputation more than the reputation of Jesus Christ. It means that I care more about what people think of me than what Jesus thinks of me. It means that in everything I do I am seeking the honor of myself rather than the honor of Christ. Loving the glory of man is finding joy in whatever object rather than in Christ. That is how our assets become liabilities. Please turn to Philippians 3:3-8 [Pew Bible pg.]

“...we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—[4] though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. **[He’s going to list his Jewish assets here]** If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. [7] But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. [8] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”

Paul counted his assets as rubbish (dung). All those things that he found personal joy in are worthless now that he gained Christ. And his exhortation to us is to count every asset you have as a liability. If we find our source of joy outside of Christ, that is loving the glory of man.

Our Duty: Believe the glory of Christ is better than the glory of man

Immediately after v.43, Jesus speaks for the last time in his public ministry in v.44-50. We don't know where he says this. There is no context whatsoever provided. But these are His last words before He departs to be with His disciples. And I believe that He is not only summarizing His entire Gospel, but giving us antidotes to loving the glory of man more than the glory of God. So let's look at two antidotes that Jesus gives for us to believe that His glory is better than the glory of man.

Antidote 1: Jesus Was Sent From the Living God and is the Living God (v. 44-46)

[44] And Jesus cried out and said, "Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. [Meaning "I'm not asking you to believe in me *merely* as a man. The Living God sent me. If you don't believe in Me, you don't believe in God."] [45] And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. [Meaning: "I am the Living God. If you believe in Me, you are believing in the Living God."] [46] I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

Loving the glory of men is darkness. What is your reputation compared to the forgiveness of sin? What is your net worth compared to never coming under the wrath of a holy God?

Antidote 2: Jesus' Words Will Judge the World On The Last Day (v.47-48)

[47] 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. [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 the last day.

In Jesus' first coming, He did not come to judge but to save. Oh what a statement! Jesus Christ, the Living God, has a right to judge the earth right

now. He had a right to judge it 2,000 years ago. But He came to save. Israel was hardened, so that He would be crucified, so that we could be forgiven of our sin and reconciled to God by believing on Him.

But as He closes His ministry, Jesus warns the world of His second coming. **His words** will judge every human being who refused to believe. No one will escape. This is terrifying. Jesus' words determine the everlasting destiny of every human being.

Jesus closed His ministry this way so that we wouldn't fall under the same condemnation as unbelieving Israel. "I am Living God. Believe in Me. My glory does not come from the darkness of this world. Walk in my light, and you will not be condemned on the last day."

Our Delight: God's commandment is eternal life

Let's look at Jesus' last words as we close. **v.49-50** "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."

Jesus last words in his public ministry tell us a great deal. "My Father's command is eternal life." Father sent His Son into the world so that we could live forever. These are His last words. "My Father's command is eternal life... *therefore* I'm going to the cross." The very last words of Jesus public ministry have us in mind. "I came to save you. I came to grant everlasting life. Believe in me, and you will never die. Believe in Me and I will wash you as white as snow. Believe in Me and I will be punished for your sin, and you will be rewarded for my righteousness." Father has done all things to make you His own. He hardened His own people Israel. He sent His Son to the cross. His commandment is eternal life.

