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John 12:37-50

Fortieth Message

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MORE HARD WORDS FOR HARD HEARTS

The gospel writers Matthew, Mark and Luke describe a range of responses to Jesus' ministry. These include fear and amazement, awe and wonder, belief and praise. But John paints the world in black and white, dividing it into the two camps – belief and unbelief, light and darkness. Why does one person believe and another does not? This is the mystery that we come to in our text today.

John 12 marks the end of Jesus' public ministry. It closes out the first of two major divisions in this gospel, beginning in chapter 2 (this was commonly known as the book of signs). Chapter 12 began with a sense of euphoria as Jesus entered Jerusalem, five days before Passover, riding on a young donkey. The teeming crowd gathered for the feast treated Jesus as royalty, proclaiming him to be the Messianic King, the son of David.

Then with the arrival of some curious Gentiles, Jesus announced to his disciples that the hour had come for him to die. But before he departed to be alone with his disciples, he had some stern words for unbelieving Israel. What began as a warm welcome ends in a rather frosty farewell. John records these words, including his own reflections, beginning in verse 27.

The second half of chapter 12 has several themes which are central to John's gospel. In our last study we noted the obedience of the Son to the will of the Father, and the issues of judgment and salvation cast in the metaphors of light and darkness. Today we come to the themes of belief and unbelief and the authority of Jesus. Beginning in verse 37, John has some arresting and thought-provoking words about the mystery of belief and unbelief.

But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: "LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT? AND TO WHOM HAS THE ARM OF THE LORD BEEN REVEALED?" For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, "HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART, SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED AND I HEAL THEM." These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him. (John 12:37-41 NASB)

John records seven of Jesus' many signs, all of which were designed to reveal the glory of God and redefine the Jews' understanding of the Messiah and their relationship with God.

In spite of these signs, however, the majority of the Jews did not believe. Not all seeing leads to faith, as John has been documenting throughout his gospel.

But now he adds some new information which unveils something of the mystery surrounding the unbelief of the Jews. To help us understand, he quotes two passages from Isaiah, explaining that what happened in reaction to Jesus was a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:1 and 6:10.

First, let's look at Isaiah 53.

Who has believed our message?

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? (Isa 53:1)

This well-known text is set in the heart of Isaiah chapters 40-66. The Suffering Servant is the main figure in these chapters, and it is this Servant whom John had in mind when he wrote about Jesus. Isaiah reports the astonishment of the nations concerning the Servant who was rejected by his people but exalted by God. "Who has believed our message?" The word "message" or "report" implies the teachings of Jesus and the gospel witness. "And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" The "arm of the Lord" is a phrase that connects to God's power during the Exodus and now connects to the power of God seen in the signs of Jesus. The Servant evokes wonder and surprise but confounds human wisdom, since he had no stature and no attractive appearance. He is afflicted and despised and therefore rejected. John relates Isaiah 53 to Israel's response to Jesus, Isaiah's Suffering Servant.

Second, let's look at Isaiah 6:9-10 in the Old Testament text:

He said, "Go, and tell this people:

'Keep on listening, but do not perceive (understand);

Keep on looking, but do not understand (know).'

"Render the hearts of this people insensitive (fat),

Their ears dull (heavy),

And their eyes dim (shut, pasted together),

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,

Hear with their ears,

Understand with their hearts,

And return and be healed." (Isa 6:9-10)

According to John, Isaiah could say these things because he "saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the

train of His robe filling the temple,” and Isaiah’s own unclean lips were healed with burning coal (6:1,7). This story is related in verses Isaiah 6:1-7, when Isaiah saw the pre-incarnate Jesus.

Then we have these verses that describe God’s word to idolatrous Israel. Notice the chiasmic structure of the Hebrew text as it moves from heart to ears to eyes, and then reverses, from seeing to hearing to understanding. The heart is insensitive or fat. As a result it is has grown content and thick, so that nothing penetrates it. The ear is described as being “heavy”; it is unresponsive and doesn’t function properly. The eyes are “pasted shut” and therefore can’t see.

The center of verse 10 focuses on the eyes. Perhaps John is drawing attention to the eyes, because the word “see” is a key word in John. The Jews saw the signs of Jesus, but they could not see the light, the glory of God that Isaiah beheld. The blind man in chapter 9 was healed and could see, but Israel remained blind.

The context of Isaiah 6 is an appeal to Israel to repent, but they will not listen. Finally God says that if Israel won’t stop worshipping idols, they will become deaf, blind and hard-hearted. They will become like their idols and not like the image of God. Israel had reached a point where they could no longer respond to God’s word; therefore they had passed judgment on themselves.

This is what is happening in John 12, at the conclusion of Jesus’ public ministry. The Jews have repeatedly refused and rejected him. They have relied on their own wisdom and now the die is cast. God has disabled spiritual senses and deadened faculties so that they cannot accept Jesus. We find Isaiah 6 quoted also in Matthew 13:14-15, Mark 4:12, Luke 8:10, and Acts 28:26; Paul quotes Isaiah 53:1 in Romans 10:16. The implication is that “unbelief is not only foreseen by Scripture but ... necessitated by Scripture”¹

Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God. (12:42-43)

Despite the unbelief, there were some who did believe, even among the rulers. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea are examples of those who believed in secret. These people were afraid to confess Jesus as the Messiah because they thought they would be thrown out of the synagogue. This was the same tension that faced the blind man and his parents in chapter 9. Losing synagogue community would result in a devastating cost to social and economic relationships.

The problem for these “stealth” believers was that they loved the glory and approval of man more than the glory and approval of God. “They were unable to extricate themselves from the ancient structures of wisdom and power by which a world alienated from the true glory, which is the love of God, seeks to establish and maintain its own glory. They believe, and yet

they cannot escape the power of this world. They love the praise of men.”²

Many people remain secretive about their faith when they first became Christians. Others who grew up as Christians can be secretive, too. This was how I acted, because I thought people would reject me. We fear the cost associated with going public about our faith. It is always a hurdle when we publicly identify our life with Christ, especially to our family, friends and co-workers, but eventually that is what God desires.

I so appreciated the demeanor and comments made by Tony Dungy, the coach of the Indianapolis Colts, following their victory in the Super Bowl. With a great deal of poise he quietly but firmly stated to a national television audience that he and Lovie Smith, the coach of the Chicago Bears, were both Christian men, doing things the Lord’s way. Dungy was not afraid of declaring his association with Jesus even in the face of losing the approval of men.

In this very Jewish gospel, John is dealing with the Jew/Gentile tension in the early church by explaining why the Jews rejected Jesus. At the same time he is setting out principles regarding the mystery of belief and unbelief. Here are some things to think about:

1. The ideas of hardening and unbelief are difficult, but they are to be viewed as the work of God himself. This is not accidental or exceptional; it is part of the purposes of God. In the Old Testament, we see this with Pharaoh and with Israel who kept rejecting God’s messengers. And just as God used Pharaoh’s hard heart, so he used the hardening of Israel to bring about his redemptive purposes through Christ.

Paul writes about this extensively in Romans 9-11. This is what John is trying to explain. The rejection of Jesus by the Jews allowed the gospel to go to the Gentiles. But we also know that God is not done yet with Israel. He is using the Gentiles to make Israel jealous, so that they might one day believe in Jesus as their Messiah. All of this is the work of God.

2. The idea that God hardens hearts does not mean that God is hardhearted. “For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.” (Rom 11:32 NAS95S). God simply gives people what they want. That is what happened to Israel. A hard heart is the result of choices made to reject God and his truth. If we respond to truth, God gives us more truth, but if we reject it, eventually time runs out, as Israel discovered in 70 A.D. It’s not that God keeps people from believing; they do this themselves.

3. Believing in Jesus must be the work of God, because God’s revelation of himself must be met by rejection and contradiction. The word of the cross is scandalous to the Jew and absurd to the Greek. Our “seeing” can only be an act of God to “those who are called” (1 Cor 1:24), and “those whom the Father draws” (John 6:44).

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians that “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not

see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (4:4). God must do a work of re-creation for us to be able to see. “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). As we sang this morning, God “called us by his grace and taught us, gave us ears and gave us eyes.”

4. God’s sovereignty is never pitted against human responsibility. As human beings, we are not passive robots. We don’t look at God’s sovereignty through the lens of a rigid pre-determination of everything that happens. God makes his appeals to us and wants us to engage our wills: “... work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:12-13 NAS95S). We hold God’s sovereignty and human choice in tension.

Belief and unbelief is a great mystery. But this mystery helps us understand how we can have conversations with people and yet they seem to be so blind. They cannot comprehend things that are obvious to us. Some people are downright hostile, while others can acknowledge truth about Jesus but just can’t accept it for themselves. Some declare that they wish they could believe. We share God’s word and make appeals to every man’s conscience, but then we trust in the work of God to bring light and life into human hearts.

But there is an important application here for us too as believers. Two weeks ago, we talked about the fact that the Jews had expectations for their Messianic king, but Jesus didn’t meet those expectations. As a result they missed the presence of God. Now we see that wrong expectations of God caused their hearts to grow hard.

And we can grow heart-hearted too. When life is difficult and it seems like God does not come through for us, our unfulfilled expectations can lead to hard hearts, deaf ears and blind eyes. Or when we become successful and comfortable, this too can cause our hearts to grow fat and unresponsive. This is always a subtle process. It doesn’t happen all at once. If we respond to truth, God gives us more truth, but if we do not respond, we begin to lose the ability to respond. Our hearts grow fat and eventually harden. We become like a petrified tree that once had life but now is rock hard. This is what happened to Israel and this is what can happen to us. John is setting out how the kingdom of God operates.

Fourteen weeks ago, I tore my Achilles tendon and had to have surgery. For several weeks I was unable to walk. Over the past few weeks I have been trying to walk again and build up my muscles. I could have chosen to stay on the couch and avoid walking. I could have told God that I wouldn’t get off the couch until I was completely healed. Eventually I would have lost the ability to even try. It was painful and awkward to try and walk again, but now that I am walking, it is getting more and more natural and I can do more and more things. This is how God works with regard to truth and light – use

or lose it. It is the moral, universal truth of the kingdom of God.

Here is the question for the day: Are we teachable? Are our hearts soft and receptive? One of the most important qualities for our life in God is a teachable heart. We must be willing to accept God on his terms. Even as believers we must guard against our hearts getting so fat and overgrown so that we can’t respond to truth. It’s not about being perfect, it’s about being teachable.

Ray Stedman was the first pastor of PBC. He was recognized around the world for his ability to impart truth. But he always allowed young pastors to preach at PBC, even as we do today. When he sat in the congregation, he took notes. He was always willing to learn from others even though he was a brilliant man.

Possessing a teachable heart allows us to change and to be a part of God’s plans and purposes. We can go to Bible study every week or attend services every Sunday, but if our heart is not teachable, we won’t change, we won’t experience the life of God through the Spirit.

Being teachable is a key ingredient to healthy relationships. One reason our relationship with our spouse or children or parents becomes difficult is that we get so set in our ways or firm in our opinions that we can’t hear the other side of things. In the early years of my own marriage, I was so determined to get what I wanted, I wasn’t teachable. Being teachable means that we can say, “I’m wrong,” “I’m sorry,” or “Help me understand.” Being teachable means we ask what we can do to change or what others need from us. Being teachable means we can ask God to open our eyes so that we can be illuminated by his truth. This too is part of believing and not believing.

The older we get the harder it is to change, because we get set in our ways. This is why it is so critical to pour our lives into youth, while the “cement is still wet,” as it were. Young people are so teachable and moldable. I brainwashed my children to love Nebraska football. I even convinced my son that one day he would be a quarterback for the Huskers. If we start pouring God’s truth and love into our children, they will have a foundation they will never forget. Of course, even as we age there is much for us to learn, and we can learn if we remain teachable.

I have many conversations with our younger singles and I often feel that there is so much I could teach them if they were teachable. Maybe that is how God looks at us. There is so much he can teach us if we have teachable hearts. God’s desire is for us to see his glory, the very that glory Isaiah saw in the face of Jesus.

There is one final theme in the last verses of chapter 12: the authority of Jesus in conjunction with salvation and judgment.

And Jesus cried out and said, “He who believes in Me, does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me. He who

sees Me sees the One who sent Me. I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness. If anyone hears My sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day. For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak. I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me.” (12:44-50)

No time or location is given for these words. According to verse 36, Jesus had gone into hiding, so John is likely offering a compressed restatement of Jesus’ message, as he did in chapter 3 (3:16-21; 31-36). But we see that Jesus does not speak in whispers, for in these final words he cries out for all to hear.

Jesus identifies himself with the Father. The one who sees Jesus sees the Father (1:18). The one who hears Jesus hears the Father. The Son does exactly what the Father wants him to do (3:31-36; 5:19; 6:37-40; 7:27-29; 8:14-17, 28-29, 42-43; 10:34-36.) “Jesus is, quite simply, God’s revelation of himself. It is God whom we meet when we meet Jesus. To believe in him is to believe in God, because Jesus is the perfectly obedient messenger of God.”³

Jesus is the light (1:4, 9), and he came to save (1:12). He invited belief by making the darkness repulsive. If we believe, we do not remain in the darkness. We see truth, we see things as they really are, therefore we are delivered from the power of lies. There are no exorcisms in John’s gospel because darkness is overcome by the presence of light.

If we believe, we never taste death. Jesus is the source and the giver of life because “He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself” (John 5:26 NAS95S). But believing is not mere intellectual assent; it is a matter of active obedience. It is not enough to hear the words of Jesus, we must “keep” them.

However, if we do not believe in Jesus, we reject God himself, and what is left is judgment. The same message that proclaims life and forgiveness to the believer proclaims condemnation and wrath to the unbeliever. Judgment is the consequence of not believing. Jesus came to offer life, but if we don’t choose belief, then we choose death. It may not happen right away, but it will come.

What Jesus is saying is critical because he is claiming the authority of God himself. He is not an angel or any messenger. He is not God junior. He is not less than God. John’s Christology is much more developed than the other gospels. The nature of Jesus as fully divine and fully human was a critical issue for the early church, especially for the Jews. The word of Moses was now being replaced with the word of the Son.

Again, the issue is, are we teachable? If we receive Jesus, we receive God himself and eternal life. If we downplay the word of Jesus, we reject the Father. We cannot have the Father without the Son. It is not an option to say, “I believe in God,” and then reject the teaching of Jesus.

These last words of Jesus to Israel in the closing verses of chapter 12 are hard words for hard hearts. But John doesn’t want to bring condemnation. He wants us to realize that our choices have serious consequences, and to make a decision to respond to light and truth.

Perhaps there is someone here this morning who hasn’t yet made a decision to accept the eternal life that Jesus promises. Or perhaps you have been too quiet and secretive about your faith. You are embarrassed about what you believe. You are giving lip service to God, not putting your life on the line. You would be amazed at what God can do if you follow Jesus and commit yourself fully to him. Or perhaps you have become hardened to what God has been trying to teach you. God is asking you to soften and open your hearts and ears and eyes to what he wants to teach you. I invite you to take that seriously. If we move from darkness to light, the arm of the Lord can accomplish mighty things.

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word. (2 Thess 2:13-17)

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 447.

² Leslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 164.

³ Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, 165.