

Sermon- The Problem of Unbelief

Scripture: John 12: 37-43

Sunday, May 12, 2019

Are you all ready to get into the Word? Well, preachers often begin with a story just to get people's attention. I don't know any story to tell you this morning. Actually I think nothing is more interesting than the Word of God. So let's get down to business.

Last Sunday we looked at what Jesus did when he came to a point where it was difficult even to know what to pray. At that point he prayed a simple three word prayer, "Father Glorify yourself" meaning, " Father, glorify yourself in this situation though me" and to that His heavenly father replied, "I have glorified myself through you in the past and will continue to do so even in this situation". The people though just don't understand why Jesus, if he is the long awaited Messiah, can die and exit the scene when he announced his presence to the people. To that, all Jesus says is, "trust me while you still can". And then Jesus disappears for a time.

In today's passage Jesus Himself has disappeared from view. It is the Gospel narrator speaking. And he says in verse 37, "*But despite all the miraculous signs Jesus had done, most of the people still did not believe in him*". He then goes on to quote Isaiah 53:1 which says, "*Lord, who has believed our message? To whom has the Lord revealed his powerful arm?*" So the fact that people did not believe Jesus itself is a fulfillment of prophesy. In this case it is from Isaiah 53:1. But then the Gospel narrator also goes on explain Isaiah 53:1 with another Isaiah passage, Isaiah 6:10 "*Harden the hearts of these people.*

Plug their ears and shut their eyes.

That way, they will not see with their eyes,

nor hear with their ears,

nor understand with their hearts

and turn to me for healing."

Now this explanation is really challenging because Is 6:10 is saying that people don't believe Jesus because God is hardening their hearts so that they don't believe. To that explanation, anybody who is awake will ask the question, "why would God want to do that, right?"

Today I am going to deal with this business of God hardening people's heart because this is not the only time you will see this mentioned in the Bible. But before I deal with that, there is another troubling issue we need to deal with. And this issue is raised by verse 37. You see verse 37 says, "*But despite all the miraculous signs Jesus had done, most of the people still did not believe in him*". This verse by itself is just fine. The problem arises because just a few verses earlier the pharisees are saying, "*There's nothing we can do. Look, everyone has gone after him!*"

These two opposing views are even more puzzling because they are not separated in time. In chapter 12 we are still in the afterglow of Jesus' triumphant entry. The bad stuff will start happening to Jesus only after his betrayal by Judas and we see that only in chapter 18. So what we get in the opposing views of Jesus' popularity in verse 19 and verse 37 is something that is somehow both true at the same time. In some ways, it was true that everyone had gone after Jesus. It was also true that most people did not really believe who Jesus was. How do we sort this out? What exactly is going on here?

I want to take you through how to work with these two versus so that you will be able to use this approach the next time you encounter a similar situation in the Bible. In this case if you go back to verse 19 and look at its context, you will find the key to unlocking this puzzle. In verse 19, look at who is making the statement. It is the Pharisees who are saying, "look everyone is going after him." If you look at verse 37, "*most of the people still did not believe in him*" who is speaking here? It is the Gospel narrator. So basically what is going on in this case is that while the facts stated in both verse 19 and 37 are equally true, when you take into consideration the who the speakers are, you get an

insight into very different aspects of the Palm Sunday event. You see what the Pharisees were observing is a very materialistic perspective of Palm Sunday. From a very materialistic perspective it was true that the whole crowd was going after Jesus. But if you looked at what the people running after Jesus really believed in their hearts, now that is the perspective only the Gospel narrator inspired by God knows about. And what the Gospel narrator was telling us was that even though it looked like everyone was going after Jesus on Palm Sunday most people did not believe that Jesus was the person who He had claimed to be. The pharisees tell you what it looked like on the outside. Everyone running after Jesus. The Gospel narrator tells you what it looked like on the inside. Most people in spite of seeing all the miracles still did not believe that Jesus was who **He** claimed to be.

It is so important to treat scripture very carefully. It is very important to not take scriptures even if they are in Red Letters in your Bible and create a theology around it. That is called “proof-texting”. It is a terrible way to treat the Bible. Proof texting is like trying to appreciate a beautiful fish by reaching your hand into the fish tank and taking it out of the water so that you can take a closer look. Taking the fish out of the water kills the fish. And so does plucking a Bible verse out of its context. That is why you will not find me throwing a lot of different Bible verses in my sermons. So just because a preacher loads a sermon full of Bible verses does not make for a faithful sermon. When you study scripture pay careful attention to where that verse lives. Contextual details like the original language, its genre, its historical context, its cultural context and even context within the full salvation history narrative. The more scripture you are working with in a sermon the harder it is to faithfully treat all that scripture and in the process you might be killing the fish rather than breathing life. Scripture has to be treated with great care or you can do more damage than good. Anyway that was my little soapbox on proof-texting.

I am going to get off that soapbox and dive into our second focal point of today's passage, the Isaiah quotations. Just to remind you, the Isaiah quote from 6:10 was *"The Lord has blinded their eyes*

*and hardened their hearts—
so that their eyes cannot see,
and their hearts cannot understand,
and they cannot turn to me
and have me heal them"*

Then in verse 41 it goes on to say, Isaiah was referring to Jesus when he said this, because *"he saw the future and spoke of the Messiah's glory"*. This raises another paradox found in the Bible. So this time we are taking verse 37 further and saying, not only did the people not believe who Jesus was, but they did not believe because... the *Lord himself blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so that their eyes cannot see and their hearts cannot understand and they cannot turn to the Lord and have the Lord heal them*. And the only proper response after hearing this verse is OMG! Oh My God, what are you doing here?

So what is God doing here? I will go through a number of concepts here so hang tight with me for a few minutes. The first thing to note is that this is verse is touching upon the theodicy problem, which is the problem of evil in relation to who God is. And this problem actually arises out of the Bible's insistence that there is only one sovereign God who has the ultimate power. You see in cultures where they believed in many gods, it was simpler because you can simply attribute different activities to different divine beings. Some were good and some were bad and so when bad things happen just blame it on the evil gods. But when you have one all powerful God, now there is a problem because even if there is a devil and his minions, they can only do what God permits them to do. And if God is permitting them to do it then the question is, does not God get the blame for evil? Then you have the question of human free will. So either

people have free will or not. And if we have free will we are resisting God. Can man resist God? If we don't have free will, then we are also not responsible for evil because God is ultimately responsible for everything that happens right? These are the main issues when you have one all powerful God. If God has all the power to make things happen then God also is responsible for everything that happens. That includes when people are blinded to the truth and harden their hearts and refuse to hear. That is exactly what is going on in our Isaiah 53 passage. You know that there are many other passages that talk about God acting in this way. In Ex 9:12 it says God hardened the Pharaoh's heart or 2 Sam 24:1 where it looks like God is inciting King David to sin by taking a census.

So the question then is, if someone does not believe, is God making them not believe? If so why would he do that? Well to address this, the first thing we have to do is survey other parts of the Bible and see what it says so we have the context of the rest of the Bible to draw from. When you look at that you have versus like James 1:13 which says God does not tempt us. In other words God **does not** goad us to do evil. You also have the sheep and goat judgment described in Matt 25 where he is telling people who are going to be destined for hell things like, "when I was hungry you did not feed me, when I was thirsty you gave me no drink". So clearly, people are judged for what they are doing and responsible for. Despite God's sovereign power, people are responsible for their actions. If you put all the larger context of scripture together we can be sure of this. ... In the action of not believing God, God is playing some role. But we can also be sure that human beings are also playing some role. If you go back to the Isaiah prophesy in verse 40, even though it says God hardening their heart and blinded their eyes, it **does not say** that those people had no role in the hardening of their own hearts. In fact nowhere in the Bible does it say that people have no role in turning away from God. In fact the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation is talking about human role is turning away from God and God's role in turning people to God. So the first things I want to say is that even

when the passage says God hardened their hearts, we know that every human being has their own responsibility for their rebellion.

But there is another thing that is going on. You see all human beings are not the same. Even in our passage, it does not say all people did not believe him. In fact verse 37 says **most** people did not believe him. **Most** is not all. See people fall on a scale of their degree of resistance to God. Some people resist God a great deal. Some people resist God only a little. If God is trying to save all the people who are predestined to be saved, then he has to cater to those who resist the most. Then all the rest will follow. He cannot cater to the mid level resistance or the low level resistance right? To address the highest level of human resistance then, God has to work in a special way with those who resist the most. Because it is the maximum resisters who will become examples for all resisters. All the people in the Bible from Moses in the Old Testament or to Apostle Paul in the New Testament where people who resisted God the most. And because you see how God has worked in their lives, God can then use those examples to work in everybody's life, right? Sometimes God uses the biggest resisters to make examples out of. That is why God also has a role in hardening people's hearts.

So what does this mean for us? You see couple things. When you read scripture and you see things that seem to contradict, know that there is a higher reality in which what seems contradictory to us makes perfect sense. To tap into that higher reality, we need the inspiration of the Holy spirit and careful study of different kinds of context.

When it comes specifically to the problem of unbelief, I can tell you we are not to look down on people who resist the Gospel. Because those who have had the longest battles with God will be the most effective evangelists in the end. CS Lewis called himself "the most reluctant convert in all of England". But through the books that he wrote about his wrestling with God, millions of people see their own struggles with God answered.

But if you are hearing this and not yet given your life to Christ, this sermon is not an excuse for you to keep resisting. Because you also have to remember that everyone has a window of opportunity when the light is still shining to make your decisions. And no one knows when their window of opportunity will close. So it is possible that this moment right now may be your only chance. On the other hand, if you are a believer, your season of wrestling with God can speak to the wrestling of many hearts. And some of you may fall into a third category. You may have come to Christ without much of a wrestle but your challenges may have come after you started following Christ. Your post conversion stories too are very valuable to others who have yet to face those kinds of struggles. So share your stories and your struggles to each other and to the world. We need to hear the stories of the struggle between unbelief and faith and so does the world. Because somewhere in those stories, will emerge the surprising transformation that God worked out in your life. And who knows how many hearts will stop wrestling and start believing because of your stories. Let us pray.