



John 12:37-50
So That You May Believe: John
“In The Light”

Rev. Brian North
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2nd Sunday of Advent

Today we continue our journey in the Gospel According to John, and we come to a passage that has one of the more misunderstood doctrines of the Christian faith in it, followed by one of the most beloved and favorite themes of Jesus’ ministry. And the result of these two things when combined together is really nothing short of breathtaking. It’s a beautiful juxtaposition that invites us into a life lived by faith in Jesus. And, it can lead to incredible joy in our lives. So, let’s dive into today’s passage. We’re in John 12:37-50, the last fourteen verses of chapter 12. We will start with verses **37-43** and then catch the rest in a few minutes. This is all God’s word to you and me today.

In verse 37, this passage begins with a statement about “all the signs Jesus had done in their presence” which is a reference to the miracles, which are signs of who Jesus is, that he performed throughout the chapters 2-12. Earlier in the series we talked about how there are 6 “signs” for sure, and some scholars suggest a 7th, though John never says how many Jesus did or how many John was intending to highlight. Some he identifies as “signs” others seem clearly to be “signs” even if they aren’t called such. Regardless, chapters 2-12 are John’s record of Jesus’ public ministry, and today’s passage wraps that up. The next several chapters, up to his sham trial, and his death and resurrection, he’s speaking to and interacting with just the 12 disciples.

John also tells us here in verse 37 that “they would not believe in him.” We might wonder who “they” are. Well, it really harkens back to the prologue of the gospel according to John, in chapter 1. Specifically, verse 11. John writes there, “**He [Jesus] came to his own but his own did not receive him**” (**John 1:11**). So, when John writes in today’s passage that “they” didn’t believe him, “they” is referring to the Jewish people, and his statement here today about the lack of belief, should not be a surprise. John told us that at the start of his gospel, and we’ve seen it in other places along the way, as well.

Now, that doesn't mean no one believed. That's obvious, because we're all here. If no one had believed then, the gospel wouldn't have been shared, and we'd all be out skiing or watching football, or doing whatever it is that you might otherwise be doing on a 30-degree day. Obviously, *some* people believed, even in Jesus' day. But in spite of the large crowds Jesus sometimes drew, Jesus was not widely embraced; *especially* by the religious leaders of the day.

John then quotes from Isaiah in regards to their unbelief. **Here we see quite clearly the doctrine of the sovereignty of God laid out.** God knows everything and has his hand involved in everything. Closely bound up with that doctrine is the doctrine of predestination. Some Christians subscribe to the doctrine of predestination, while others don't, usually because they misunderstand it. And oftentimes that misunderstanding comes because of passages like this one, among others.¹ So, people read this and they blame God for people's unbelief, or hard hearts, or whatever ill is facing them. And when it comes to our eternal destination – whether it's heaven or hell – people presume that God's sovereignty, and particularly predestination, means there's some unchangeable decree given by God almighty and we have no say in the matter. So what difference does belief make, anyway? But let me share a parable I created that I think helps us understand it better.

One evening, after a child had hung out with some of his friends earlier in the day, he goes to his parents and says, “You never let me do fun things with my friends.” And the parents respond, “Well, some of those fun things require a certain amount of responsibility and ability to make good decisions and do the right thing because there aren't parents around in those situations to monitor things and help make wise decisions. And we will gladly let you do those things with your friends once you demonstrate your ability to make good decisions and show responsibility – like choosing to get schoolwork done in class, and choosing to come right home after school and doing your homework without us asking you to do it, working hard to get good grades in school, choosing to do your chores around the house without us reminding you a thousand times, and so forth.”

And then the child says, “Yeah, but even if I did all that you *still* wouldn’t let me go do those things with my friends. I’m sure of that.” And the parents paraphrase Malachi 3:10 and say, “Test us and see if we will not throw open the floodgates of fun times with your friends if you will first show yourself to be responsible and able to make wise decisions and choices in life.” But the child chooses instead to blame the parents for not letting him have fun with his friends. End of parable ☺. (By the way, the characters in the preceding story are purely fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons in my home or yours is completely coincidental.☺)

Now, I think the parable is pretty clear. But maybe you’re like Jesus’ disciples who are always asking Jesus to explain the parables. So here you go: **The child chooses not to trust or test his parents, doesn’t do his schoolwork or his chores without a lot of badgering, and blames the parents, in their “household sovereignty,” for “predestining” him to a life without any fun...or, to use the word from this second Sunday in Advent: a life without any joy.** Is this the parents’ fault? Clearly not. The parents want the child to have a joy-filled life and makes it very clear about how to experience that joy. But the child chooses a different path. Could he or she eventually choose differently? Absolutely. And this is much how our Heavenly Father’s sovereignty and our free will work together. So, Jesus’ teaching and the signs he gave about who he is fell on deaf ears, were seen by blind eyes, and were rejected by spiritually hard-hearted people. But that is not the final word nor the only outcome.

We see that: **There is a “nevertheless” in verse 42: some believed.** The door is not “closed.” The preceding verses don’t mean people can’t choose Jesus. Their choice was not predetermined before Jesus came in their lives, just as our free choice is not determined before he comes into our lives. There were some, even among the leaders John says, who believed. Now, they were tentative in their faith...but John is saying that faith was there. The problem is that they “loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (verse 43).

It’s easy to think that John drops that in there purely as a criticism of them. It feels like a bit of a snide remark. And it would be easy just to cast judgment on these guys and then move on. But there’s more to it than that. **This verse**

invites us to look in the mirror at ourselves. Remember: John writes because he wants us to believe. This means we need to examine our own hearts. We actually talked about this “praise of people vs. praise of God” a few weeks ago in a message about who do we fear more? Because who we fear is who we’re going to try and please, and whose praise we desire. So, these guys who came to faith but struggled to live it out publicly, simply had the same struggle that a lot of us who cling to Jesus probably wrestle with as well. It’s definitely a point of examination for each of us to take on: who do we seek to please, and whose praise of “well done” are we seeking? Let’s read the last few verses (9:44-50).

Here we see Jesus summarizing his public teaching: that believing in him is the key to believing in God and experiencing eternal life. The reason to believe in him is that he was sent by God the Father. In fact, to receive Jesus is to receive God the Father. Conversely – and in close connection with the first few verses we looked at – whoever rejects Jesus rejects God the Father. Jesus says similar things elsewhere in John, as well as in the other gospels, such as Matthew 10:40, where Jesus says that whoever receives him receives the Father. The signs Jesus has given throughout his public ministry since chapter 2 demonstrate the validity of his claim. That’s why the miracles (water to wine, blind seeing, lame walking, Lazarus raised from the dead, plus others) are more than just miracles – they’re *signs* of who Jesus is: God come to us in flesh, so that we would believe.

And: **The blessing, or the benefit for us, of believing in Jesus is that we will no longer be walking in darkness, but in the light.** Earlier John quoted from Isaiah, and here Jesus alludes to a theme from there as well, when he talks about being the light of the world so that anyone who believes in him would not stay in the darkness. That theme comes straight from Isaiah 9:2, **“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy.” (Isaiah 9:2-3).**

Remember, this was written like 600 years earlier, and Jesus is absolutely laying claim to these words when he speaks of being the light, and bringing people out of darkness when they believe in him. And then we see the joy

that this brings. Their joy is increased, and they rejoice before God. This is what Jesus gives us, when we believe in him. He brings real, lasting joy. In God's sovereignty he makes this possible. God desires for you and me to know this joy. To experience this joy. It's why Jesus came. It's why he lived. It's why he died. It's why he rose from the grave. And it's why he lived out his heavenly father's will, his commands. So we'd walk in the light and have that joy. And as Jesus says in verse 50 of today's passage, the commands that the Father has given to him leads to eternal life. What Jesus has done leads to eternal life.

Talk about joy! Life is joyous. Yes, it has its challenges because of sin. But at its core, at its purest form, as God intends it: life is joyful. I mean, the birth of a baby is a joyous occasion. We see that in the birth of Jesus, we see it in births in our own families. Our family is experiencing a "birth" of sorts as we adopt Jerry David this week; it's scary as all get-out for us, and probably more so for him...but it is joyous. And these things are joyous because life is joyous. That is God's intent for life. And Jesus is saying that we can experience eternal life - or eternal joy - in him. Jesus himself, and God's commands, bring joy.

I'm reminded of Psalm 1, which reads, "**Blessed is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand (go about life) in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight [joy!] is in the law of the Lord. And on his law he meditates day and night**" (Psalm 1:1-2). Delight and joy are found in God's Law...in God's commands. We can't perfectly carry out God's commands because our sin keeps getting in the way; but Jesus has. And his perfect life – from his birth we celebrate at Christmas to his resurrection we celebrate at Easter – his life brings us into the light and gives eternal joy and eternal life.

So, if you are not walking in the light of Jesus Christ...and you may not think you're in the darkness, but Jesus is clear that when we're separated from him then we're in the dark: **If you're not in relationship with Jesus and walking in his light, I invite you to do that this morning.** Unfortunately, some people, like a child who doesn't believe their parents want good things for them...some people have a hard time believing God is good and wants us

to experience his joy now and forevermore. And so, some people walk away from him. But we weren't meant to be in this world separated from God. Jesus came to bring us back into relationship with him, to be in the light, and to experience his joy, the joy of life, and the joy of eternal life. That's his gift to you this Christmas. You're never too far away from him to receive it. He offers it to you unconditionally.

For those of us who already know Jesus, and experience his joy and his light, I think: **We need to keep coming back to verse 43 and ask ourselves: am I seeking the praise of people or the praise of God?** What fuels me? What drives me? Am I walking in, with, and by the light of Jesus? Let's make sure we're pleasing God so he would shower us with praises and words of "well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23). Let's live in such a way that the light of Jesus shines brightly. Be the kind of Jesus follower that when people see you, when they interact with you, when they think of you...they will experience something different, something heavenly, good, holy, and right...all because Jesus shines through, rather than being hidden away. That's a gift we can give others this Christmas, and throughout the year, so that more people would walk in the light of Jesus. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ One that many turn to and misunderstand are the examples of Pharaoh's hard heart in Exodus 7-11. I preached on that on 7/25/21. Video of the sermon is available [here](#), and the text of the sermon is available by contacting the church.