

While You Have the Light

One of the most difficult things to understand is the persistent unbelief of folks who have heard the Gospel at various times over many years. Our text today teaches us some very important elements about this phenomenon.

John 12:34-43

34 So the crowd answered him, “We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” **35** So Jesus said to them, “The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. **36** While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”

The Unbelief of the People

When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. **37** Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, **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?”

39 Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said,

40 “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.”

41 Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. **42** 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; **43** for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

This text represents the last public address that Jesus makes to the crowds. It comes at the conclusion of what is known as the “book of signs,” John 1-12, in which Jesus demonstrates His Messiah-ship and that He is the Son of God through seven amazing signs, the last of which is the raising of Lazarus from the dead. And yet, some people still do not believe. In this text, we have Jesus’ encounter with persistent unbelievers (vv. 34-36) and John’s commentary upon that encounter (vv. 37-43).

I. **Jesus pleads with persistent unbelievers (vv. 34-36)**

We see in verse 34 that the crowds ask an intellectually legitimate question about how it is that the Messiah can be crucified. Jesus had previously told them that He would be lifted up (crucified) and yet, they know from the Old Testament that the Messiah is to endure forever (for example, see Isaiah 9:7 and Daniel 7:13-14). The difficulty with this question is that Jesus has already addressed it by teaching that He would triumph as Messiah through laying down His life for His people and then being resurrected to eternal glory. This is the problem with many intellectual questions: 1) They have already been duly answered by the Lord and 2) They become simply a strategy to circumvent the real issues.

One notices in Jesus’ response that He doesn’t bother to answer this question, but rather addresses the more important issue by pleading with them to believe the Light that is presented to them. Jesus pleads with persistent unbelievers to reconsider their stubborn

unbelief. In verses 35-36, we can see that He uses the common contrast of light and dark to describe the urgency of their situation and, furthermore, to explain that they will not always have the Light and that if they refuse it, eventually the darkness will overtake them. He also promises to them that if they believe the Light they will actually become “Sons of Light,” that is, they will themselves have light in their own lives by which to live. One can sense the special urgency of this plea, as Jesus gives His last public discourse to the crowd.

II. **John comments on the encounter between Jesus and persistent unbelievers (vv. 37-43)**

One of the biggest questions among Jewish converts in John’s day was, “if Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God, why is it that the larger population of the Jews are rejecting these claims?” John sets out to explain this phenomenon.

a. The persistent unbeliever willfully suppresses abundant evidence (v. 37)

Verse 37 describes the abundant evidence that the Jewish people had received from Jesus: the seven signs that He has performed. The only answer adequate to explain their lack of belief is found in Paul’s epistle to the Romans: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness, suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.” (Romans 1:18-20).

b. This is all part of God’s plan (vv. 38-41)

John describes how the behavior of persistent unbelievers among God’s covenant people is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy concerning divine judicial hardening among His own people. We all remember how Pharaoh’s heart was hardened by God because of his persistent unbelief, but here John quotes Isaiah who says to the Israelites that this divine judicial hardening would be applied even to Israel, because of their persistent unbelief. We must realize that we are dealing with an awesome God, Who, in His grace and mercy, will not always tolerate our persistent unbelief. Notice that John says the reason Isaiah said these things, as hard as they are, is that he beheld the glory of Jesus Christ (presumably a pre-incarnate visitation).

c. The persistent unbeliever loves the wrong glory (vv. 42-43)

John, like a good pastor and preacher, points out the deepest reason for persistent unbelief when he says that “they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” Here are some folks who, on one hand, believed certain things about Jesus and the Gospel but, on the other hand, preferred to be “secret believers,” because of their fear of the Pharisees. There really is no such thing as “secret believers.” Folks may believe certain doctrines, but they do not trust Jesus Christ when they seek the glory of man over the glory of God. It is the same glory which Isaiah saw and which motivated him and his ministry that they are lacking. But the greatest lesson to be drawn from this text is the persistent grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to those who at times are persistent unbelievers. Acts 6:7 reveals that there were many priests who became believers eventually by the preaching of the Apostles. There is one reason for this: God’s grace is more persistent than our unbelief!

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the crowds ask the question in verse 34?

2. Why did Jesus answer them as He did in verses 35-36?

3. In verses 37-43, why did John explain to his readers the persistent unbelief of the crowds?

4. Why did God harden the hearts of the Israelites in Isaiah 6:9-13? Why did John apply that text to the crowds in Jesus' day?

5. What is the fundamental problem with "secret believers"?

Going Deeper

1. How do you tend to use intellectual questions to circumvent moral and spiritual issues in your life?

2. In what circumstances do you tend to become a "secret believer" out of fear of what others might think of you? What is the real underlying problem with this behavior?