

## To Believe or Not to Believe; That is the Question

### John 12:37-43

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As Jesus approaches the end of his ministry to redeem a people given to him by the Father, we are given a glimpse into the spiritual condition of the very people who claim Abraham as their father, identified as Jews belonging to the nation of Israel.

When we look at the ministry of Jesus Christ it is demonstrated with signs and miracles that started with our Lord turning water into wine.

**John 2:7-11** <sup>7</sup> Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." So they filled them up to the brim. <sup>8</sup> And He said to them, "Draw *some* out now and take it to the headwaiter." So they took it *to him*. <sup>9</sup> When the headwaiter tasted the water which had become wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom, <sup>10</sup> and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first, and when *the people* have drunk freely, *then he serves* the poorer wine; *but* you have kept the good wine until now." <sup>11</sup> This beginning of *His* signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.

And yet, as we see in our text today, many of those who followed Jesus because of the signs and wonders were not believing. Why is that?

There is a tendency among many Christians to think that if one only has enough information to process then they would logically come to the correct conclusion based on that information. This is why we might be tempted to think that if I only give people the gospel in a coherent way they must come to faith.

Of course, this overlooks the obvious. People don't reject Christ because they have a deficiency in processing knowledge, they have a deficiency in life itself, which is to say, they can't see because they are spiritually dead.

Dead men don't see much. All throughout the gospel of John we see this. In the very beginning of this gospel John records what is most certainly true of all men

as he tells Nicodemus that he must be born again, or born from above. But he adds the caveat that Nicodemus's rebirth is not something he himself can conjure up.

**John 3:3** <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Jesus does not say that Nicodemus or anyone who is not born again will choose not to see the Kingdom. Jesus says, they cannot see the kingdom. The Greek word for cannot is *dunamai* and it means they do not have the power, or the ability to see spiritual things; in this case with Nicodemus.

Jesus then repeats himself. **John 3:5** "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot (or does not have the ability) to enter into the kingdom of God.

Jesus is saying that it is not a head problem. Nicodemus was a pretty smart guy, being a Pharisee. It was a heart problem. But it's a heart problem that cannot be solved by the natural man, because the natural man is by nature a hater of God. Later in this same section of John's gospel Jesus makes this clear.

**John 3:19** <sup>19</sup> "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.

So, you're saying that men love the darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil, therefore men will not come to the light, who is Jesus Christ? The short answer is yes. But what about the verses that precedes verse 19?

**John 3:16-18** <sup>16</sup> "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. <sup>18</sup> "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

See, the whole world must have the ability to believe in the Son and therefore there must be an aspect to man that has the ability to choose to come to Christ. Fair enough. But as with all Scripture we must exegete these and other passages by comparing all Scripture and allowing the more-clear verses to define those verses that are less clear or less exhaustive.

Again, unless Jesus was only kidding about the necessity of being born again prior to having the ability to see, let alone enter the kingdom of God, then we just don't understand the deadness of man's heart toward the things of God.

Jesus repeats himself again later in this same gospel when speaking to those Jews who identified themselves with the kingdom of God, because of their connection to their father Abraham. But Jesus identifies their real father.

**John 8:42-44** <sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me. <sup>43</sup> "Why do you not understand what I am saying? *It is* because you cannot hear My word. <sup>44</sup> "You are of *your* father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father.

Jesus could not be more explicit in identifying the spiritual deadness of the natural man, something Paul also speaks to when writing to the Corinthian church.

**1 Corinthians 2:14-15** <sup>14</sup> But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. <sup>15</sup> But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one.

If all mankind is born into this world as natural, that is fleshly as opposed to spiritual, then how do they move from natural to spiritual? That's precisely the point Jesus was making to Nicodemus; one must first have a spiritual birth from above; born again. I've dealt with this subject in some detail in this very gospel back in chapter 6 and also in Ephesians 2:1 where Paul identifies all men as dead in their trespasses and sins.

In today's church culture where people have a tendency to want to "feel" the Scriptures in their lives instead of carefully studying what the word of God actually says, it is argued that the unbeliever's heart is sick and needs healing from the Savior.

The idea that the natural man outside of Christ has a heart in need of healing assumes his heart is alive, but just sick. But the natural man's heart isn't sick, it's dead in need of a resurrection, what Jesus identifies as being born again.

The prophet Ezekiel records God's very word on this issue of the deadness of man's heart outside of God doing a miracle to that dead heart; a spiritual rebirth.

**Ezekiel 11:19-20** <sup>19</sup> "And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, <sup>20</sup> that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God.

And this is really the point as we come back to our text as John notes that not even witnessing miracles will cause someone to embrace Christ with a saving faith. In fact, Jesus relays the story of a poor man by the name of Lazarus (not the Lazarus that Jesus raised from the dead) and the rich ruler, both of whom died and went to their respective habitations, heaven and hell.

From hell the rich man cried out to Abraham to send someone from the dead to go back and warn his family of where they will end up, thinking that a resurrected person would certainly convince the hard-hearted people of earth. Here was Abraham's response to that request.

**Luke 16:31 - 17:1** <sup>31</sup> "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Again, it is not a head and knowledge problem, it is a heart problem that only God can solve through taking that heart of stone and miraculously turning it into a heart of flesh, what Paul calls regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

**Titus 3:5-6** <sup>5</sup> He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, <sup>6</sup> whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,

And this is why the apostle John records the words of Isaiah in relation to the deadness of men and their inability to have eyes to see and ears to hear in a spiritual sense.

**John 12:37-40** <sup>37</sup> But though He had performed so many signs before them, *yet* they were not believing in Him. <sup>38</sup> *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?"

This particular section of Isaiah is actually found in the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah that speaks directly to the person who is standing before these Jews at the time of Jesus' ministry. You might remember these words in the context of the One sent to take our sin and iniquities.

**Isaiah 53:1-5** <sup>NAU</sup> Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? <sup>2</sup> For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, And like a root out of parched ground; He has no *stately* form or majesty That we should look upon Him, Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. <sup>3</sup> He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. <sup>4</sup> Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.

The Jews during the time of Isaiah were no different than the Jews who are literally experiencing the fulfillment of these words that identify the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. But John goes on to quote Isaiah one more time.

**John 12:39-40** <sup>39</sup> For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, <sup>40</sup> "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."

What? Notice what John says in verse 39, "for this reason they could not believe." It doesn't say they would not believe, but they could not believe. And there's that phrase "could not" that is represented in the Greek as *dunamai*, telling us they did not have power or the ability to believe because of the deadness of their hearts

that the Lord chose to harden even further, thus ensuring that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart.

We go back to the problem of the heart of man. Does God owe grace to anybody? Absolutely not! Is He not our creator and Potter who has the right to mold from the same lump of clay vessels of honor and vessels of dishonor? Those are the very words Paul records for us in Romans 9:21. But he then goes on to make this statement in light of God's choice according to His will.

**Romans 9:22-24** <sup>22</sup> What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? <sup>23</sup> And *He did so* to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, <sup>24</sup> *even us*, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

God does all things for His glory and He is the only true free agent when it comes to those things that He has decreed before the foundations of the world that include choosing a people for His own possession, long before the first atom of creation was called into existence by God.

**Ephesians 1:3-6** <sup>3</sup> Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ, <sup>4</sup> just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love <sup>5</sup> He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, <sup>6</sup> to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

So, when we come back to these Jews to whom Jesus addresses in John 12, he is simply identifying a people who claim Abraham as their father but are unwilling to see Jesus as the Messiah because they do not have eyes to see. They are spiritually blind as Isaiah makes clear.

**John 12:41** <sup>41</sup> These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him.

Isaiah saw whose glory? The glory of his Savior, Jesus Christ. And when did he see this?

<sup>ESV</sup> **Isaiah 6:1** In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. <sup>3</sup> And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

Isaiah was taken into the throne room of God the year King Uzziah died, some 735 years before the birth of Christ, and saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. But I thought the apostle John recorded for us that what Isaiah was shown was the Messiah as recorded in Isaiah 53. You would be right and that's

the point. When John tells us that Isaiah saw the glory of God, he was describing the Son of God in an eschatological or future way. The very Son who was sent from the Father, whom these Jews cannot and will not recognize.

**John 8:40-43** <sup>40</sup> "But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do. <sup>41</sup> "You are doing the deeds of your father." They said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God." <sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me. <sup>43</sup> "Why do you not understand what I am saying? *It is* because you cannot hear My word.

Oh yeah, Isaiah prophesied that and it was fulfilled in the very presence of these people who claimed they knew God the Father, but Jesus makes it clear what father they belong to. The devil. What then are we to conclude? How can anyone come to God if all are dead in their trespasses and sins and unable to see? That's the same question Jesus's disciples asked of him.

**Matthew 19:23-26** <sup>23</sup> And Jesus said to His disciples, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>24</sup> "Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." <sup>25</sup> When the disciples heard *this*, they were very astonished and said, "Then who can be saved?" <sup>26</sup> And looking at *them* Jesus said to them, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

It's going to take a miracle and God is in the business of doing miracles as we will see in the next part of our text.

**John 12:42-43** <sup>42</sup> Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him,...

Okay, so Jesus makes it clear that these people who have been following his ministry are only doing so because of the miracles he is performing. But earlier in this gospel Jesus says they cannot hear or believe in the Son because they are of their father the devil.

So, if all men are spiritually blind and cannot see the kingdom of God and the King himself, Jesus Christ, how is it that some of the rulers believed in him?

When considering the belief that a person places in God it must be in the context of how that belief works itself out over time. Is it a true belief or a fair-weather belief? In other words, is it a belief that the Spirit of God has enabled as He causes a new birth to eternal life in that person, or is it a belief in fishes and loaves, for example, that is good only for the moment? Jesus addresses this as well when describing the soil of men's hearts on which the word of God is sown.

**Luke 8:13-15** <sup>13</sup> "Those on the rocky *soil are* those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no *firm* root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. <sup>14</sup> "The *seed* which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of *this* life, and bring no fruit to maturity. <sup>15</sup>

"But the *seed* in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.

That honest and good heart is not something these people conjured up in their spiritual deadness, but rather, as Ezekiel records for us, their hearts were miraculously changed to embrace the truth of God's salvation.

**Ezekiel 36:26-27** <sup>26</sup> "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

Even Judas believed in Jesus Christ in a way where he followed the Messiah for some 3 plus years, and yet we know that it was not a belief unto eternal life as he was never a true disciple of the Lord as Jesus makes clear.

**John 6:69-71** <sup>69</sup> "We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God." <sup>70</sup> Jesus answered them, "Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and *yet* one of you is a devil?" <sup>71</sup> Now He meant Judas *the son* of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray Him.

So, did these rulers, back in our text, really believe as God opened their eyes to the truth? There is no reason not to think that some of them truly believed. But again, if they did it was not because they had the spiritual where-withal to figure it out. Rather, they were graciously given eyes to see and ears to hear by the Spirit of God.

**John 1:12-13** <sup>12</sup> But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name, <sup>13</sup> who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And yet, some of these same rulers, whom we are told believed in Jesus Christ, seemed to demonstrate a faith that was not very strong at best, or not a real faith, at worst.

**John 12:42-43** <sup>42</sup> 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; <sup>43</sup> for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

So, we're told that many of the rulers believed in Christ. So, how did that belief work itself out? What was the fruit of their belief in this context? The first thing we are told is that they refused to confess, or speak favorably of Jesus publicly, because they feared men, particularly the Pharisees. Why did they fear the Pharisees?

Well, the text tells us. "For fear that they would be put out of the synagogue." In other words, because their religious and political positions would be jeopardized, and their status among men could possibly come to an end, they were not willing to follow and confess Jesus Christ before men. And here, the apostle John gives us more insight as to why.

**John 12:43** <sup>43</sup> for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

A couple of things to note here. These rulers are described as those who were not willing to confess Jesus Christ before men. Jesus does address this attitude in the gospel of Matthew.

**Matthew 10:32-33** <sup>32</sup> "Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. <sup>33</sup> "But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.

As to loving the approval of men rather than the approval of God this harkens back to the words of Jesus earlier in this gospel.

<sup>NAU</sup> **John 5:44** "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the *one and only* God?"

What I find interesting about verse 43 of our text is that John uses the word loved, (*agapao, agape*) as in they loved the approval of men. And then he contrasts that love with the approval of God. In this case their love of approval of men trumps their love and approval of God.

This is very strong language that John uses in this verse. He could have said that these rulers desired the approval of men, or they sought the approval of men, but instead he says they loved the approval of men. This is similar to the love that Jesus says the world has for darkness.

**John 3:19** <sup>19</sup> "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved (*agapao, agape*) the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.

The other thing to note here is that the word "approval," that the NAS version uses when translating the Greek word *doxa*, is actually the same word for glory or praise.

When announcing the birth of the Messiah to the shepherds in the field near Bethlehem the angels give praise to God.

**Luke 2:14** <sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

The word glory here in Luke is the same Greek word, *doxa*, that we have in in John 12:43 which is why the ESV of the bible translates this verse with the word glory.

<sup>ESV</sup> **John 12:43** for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

So, are we to conclude that the faith these rulers had in Jesus was a true faith? Again, that would depend on the fruit of the Spirit that worked itself out over time in the lives of these people, demonstrating that it was a faith that endured to the end.



And at least as far as two of these rulers it would seem that Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea, had a faith that demonstrated a love for Christ in the midst of the turmoil that surrounded Jesus, especially after his death.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Mark 15:42** And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, <sup>43</sup> Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

And then we read in John's gospel of Nicodemus' involvement in this request.

**John 19:38-40** <sup>38</sup> After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret *one* for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So, he came and took away His body. <sup>39</sup> Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds *weight*. <sup>40</sup> So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

Both of these men would certainly fit the description of what John describes in our text as men who believed in Jesus, but because of the fear they had of the Pharisees and their position among these men prior to our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection, they chose not to make that faith something that was evident among the other rulers.

And yet, after the death of Jesus they were most willing to seek the glory of God rather than the glory of men. But again, it had nothing to do with their ability to see the things of God in the deadness of their sin, but rather, because as Jesus explained to Nicodemus, he had to be first born from above to have eyes to see and ears to hear. Salvation is entirely by the grace of God.

We'll pick up here next time as we finish the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of John.