WHY PEOPLE DON’T BELIEVE IN JESUS

John 12:36b-43

By

Steven J. Cole

October 12, 2014

© Steven J. Cole, 2014

To access previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to Sermons tab: www.fcfonline.org

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture Quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, Updated Edition © The Lockman Foundation
October 12, 2014
John, Lesson 69

**Why People Don’t Believe in Jesus**

*John 12:36b-43*

A familiar wall plaque motto reads, “Jesus never fails.” I like that reminder. It tells me that Jesus is always trustworthy and consistent in His faithfulness toward us. Indeed, “Jesus never fails!”

But if we honestly were to evaluate Jesus’ ministry to this point in the Gospel of John, we might wonder, “Has Jesus failed in His ministry?” The picture John gives us just a few days before Jesus’ crucifixion is rather dismal. Granted, He has a few faithful followers here and there. But even the twelve weren’t very solid. Judas would soon betray Him; Peter would deny Him; and all would desert Him in His hour of need. Thomas at first would doubt Jesus’ resurrection. They didn’t seem like a promising group to which to entrust the entire future of the faith!

As we see in our text (12:42-43), there are a few of the Jewish leaders who profess to believe in Jesus, but they’re afraid to take a public stand for Him. The majority of the Jewish leaders were intent on killing Jesus. Most of the Jewish people would not commit themselves to Christ for fear of being excommunicated (John 9:22). Besides, they wanted a political Messiah who would deliver them from Rome, and Jesus didn’t seem to fit the bill.

So as John ends this long section that has shown mounting opposition to Jesus, we may wonder, “Did Jesus fail in His ministry? If not, why didn’t the Jews accept Jesus as their Messiah?” For that matter, why haven’t most people down through history believed in Jesus as Savior and Lord?

The question of why most Jews in Jesus’ day and most Jews down through history have rejected Jesus as their Messiah probably isn’t keeping you awake at night. We’re used to the fact that the church consists mostly of Gentiles. But to the apostles, who were all Jewish, this was a huge concern. It threatened the credibility of who Jesus claimed to be. They lived in light of the Old Testament prophecies. They knew that the Jews were God’s chosen people and that God would send His Messiah to bless them. They also
believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah. But, if that was true, then why didn’t Israel welcome Jesus joyfully? Why did they not only reject Jesus, but consent to His crucifixion? Why were more Gentiles than Jews responding favorably to the gospel?

Those questions caused the apostle Paul “great sorrow and unceasing grief” (Rom. 9:2). He devoted Romans 9-11 to answer the question of why Israel had rejected Jesus. In his answer, he emphasized God’s sovereignty even over people’s hardness of heart to show that human sin cannot thwart God’s purpose (Romans 9). He always accomplishes His will. Paul also emphasized human responsibility, both our responsibility to preach the gospel and sinners’ responsibility to respond to it (Romans 10). He concluded that a partial judicial hardening had happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles had come in. Then God would fulfill His promises to Israel (Romans 11).

Our text is John’s contribution to the same difficult question of why the Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah. John’s answer is not as comprehensive as Paul’s, but like Paul he emphasizes both God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. He shows us that human sin never derails God’s sovereign purposes, but at the same time, people are responsible for their sin and they will be judged if they refuse to believe in Christ. John’s message is:

**People do not believe in Jesus because they reject the light that God has given them, resulting in God’s judicially blinding them; but some see Jesus’ glory and believe.**

We’ll divide the text into four parts:

1. **People do not believe in Jesus because they reject the light that He has given them (12:36-37).**

   John 12:36: “‘While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light.’ These things Jesus spoke, and He went away and hid Himself from them.”

   Jesus is the Light of the world (John 8:12). He exhorted the Jews to believe in Him as the Light while they had the opportunity. But then, realizing their determination to reject and kill Him, Jesus went away and hid Himself from them. We don’t know where He went, but perhaps it was Bethany to stay with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. But His departure symbolized the judicial judgment that
was about to fall on Israel. It was a prophetic drama acted out to say to Israel, “If you reject Me, I will withdraw and you will not have the Light among you.” Hiding Himself also reflects the truth that John has repeatedly shown, that Jesus would die in accord with the Father’s timetable, not whenever the Jews wanted to kill Him. His death would be at the Passover, because He is the Lamb of God (John 1:29).

Then John (12:37) adds his commentary, “But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him.” John has presented seven signs (his favorite term for miracles) that Jesus has performed: turning the water into wine (John 2:1-11); healing the royal official’s son (John 4:46-54); healing the lame man by the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-9); feeding the 5,000 (John 6:1-14); walking on the water (John 6:16-25); opening the eyes of the man born blind (John 9:1-7); and raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44). But John (20:30) states that there were many other signs that Jesus performed which are not written in this Gospel. But the ones that he wrote should have been more than sufficient to lead people to believe in Jesus (John 20:31). Yet for the most part, the Jews did not believe.

But why would people reject Jesus as the light that God gave them, especially when that light was authenticated by these powerful miracles? John 3:19-20 answered that question:

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. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

People reject God’s light because they love their sin. Paul said a similar thing in Romans 1:18-21, where he shows that God has clearly revealed His eternal power and divine nature through creation. But people suppress the truth in unrighteousness. They want to hold onto their sins, so they hold down the truth of God as the almighty Creator and believe in ridiculous myths, like evolution, so that they can continue in their sins. This repeats the truth that I mentioned last time, that when people reject Christ, usually their main need is not to get their theological questions answered, but rather to repent of their sins.
So I will often ask a skeptic, “Are you saying that if I can give you a reasonable answer to this question, you will put your trust in Jesus as your Savior?” The one who is suppressing the truth will invariably reply, “I have a lot of other questions, too!” He’s not looking for answers; he is rejecting the light that God has given him. John 12:36-37 focuses on human responsibility for unbelief. People do not believe in Jesus because they reject the light that God has given them. And they reject the light because they love their sin. But this leads to something scary:

2. If people reject the light that God has given them, He will judicially blind them even more (12:38-40).

John 12:38-40: “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.’”

By citing these verses from Isaiah 53:1 and Isaiah 6:10, John makes two startling claims: (1) The Jews’ rejection of Jesus was in order to fulfill prophecy; (2) The Jews were incapable of believing because God had blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts. There is a third startling claim for liberal critics who say that Isaiah didn’t write all of Isaiah: The first quote comes from so-called “second Isaiah,” while the second quote comes from “first Isaiah,” but John, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, affirms that Isaiah wrote both quotes. Isaiah wrote all of Isaiah!

But, to go back to John’s first two claims, that the Jews’ rejection of Jesus was in order to fulfill prophecy, and that they were incapable of believing because God had blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts: D. A. Carson (The Gospel According to John [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 447) calls those claims, “unambiguous predestinarianism.” John is saying that the Jews’ unbelief was “not only foreseen by Scripture but on that very account necessitated by Scripture” (ibid., italics his). Further, the cause of their final unbelieving rejection of Jesus was that God had judicially blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts so that they could not believe. Be-
cause the Jews would not believe, God judicially blinded them so that they could not believe. By the way, Jesus cited the same text (Isa. 6:9-10) to explain why He spoke to the multitudes in parables (Matt. 13:14-15). And Paul quoted the same verses to the unbelieving Jews who visited him in Rome to justify why he had turned to the Gentiles (Acts 28:25-27).

John’s first quote (from Isa. 53:1), “LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT? AND TO WHOM HAS THE ARM OF THE LORD BEEN REVEALED?” is in the context of Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering Servant, who like a lamb led to the slaughter, would bear the sins of His people. The “arm of the Lord” refers to His mighty power. You would think that everyone who saw a miracle would believe. But John says that the arm of the Lord must be revealed. If God doesn’t open people’s eyes, they will not see that Jesus’ miracles authenticate Him as God’s Messiah. They will explain them away by natural means. This reveals the condition of people fallen in sin, who are (Eph. 4:18) “darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart.”

The same thing had happened when Moses led Israel out of bondage in Egypt as God performed mighty miracles. You would think that the Jews would have seen the plagues in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the pillar of cloud and fire, the provision of water and manna in the wilderness, and the many other miracles as manifestations of God’s mighty power. But Moses said (Deut. 29:2-4), “You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh and all his servants and all his land; the great trials which your eyes have seen, those great signs and wonders. Yet to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear.” The arm of the Lord must be revealed. People are spiritually blind unless God opens their eyes!

In John 12, the idea is that in spite of the many mighty miracles that Jesus performed, people would not believe in Him as their Messiah because He didn’t fit their expectation of a mighty, conquering political Messiah. Rather (Isa. 53:2-3), “He has no stately form or majesty, that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Since Jesus
didn’t fit the Jews’ expectations for their Messiah, they rejected Him even though He had performed so many signs before them.

There is an application here for us who have believed: At some point, Jesus probably won’t fit your expectations of what you thought He would be when you trusted in Him as your Savior. You may have thought that He would fix all your problems, but your problems have grown worse. You may have expected Him to save all your family and resolve all your family conflicts. But instead, your family members have hardened themselves in unbelief and they oppose you because you believe. Be careful not to fall away from Jesus when He doesn’t fit your expectations!

Dr. Carson (p. 448) acknowledges that a superficial reading of John 12:38-40 may find it “harsh, manipulative, [and] even robotic.” He offers (pp. 448-449) four things to keep in mind (which I’m paraphrasing and supplementing here): (1) “God’s sovereignty in these matters is never pitted against human responsibility.” The Bible often puts God’s sovereignty and human responsibility side by side (Acts 4:27-28): “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.” God predestined the cross; but those who killed Jesus were responsible for their sin (see, also, Acts 2:23). In a way that we cannot understand, God is sovereign over evil and yet never responsible for it.

(2) God’s judicial hardening is not the capricious manipulation of an arbitrary Sovereign toward morally neutral or good people, but rather His holy condemnation of guilty people who are condemned to the judgment that they themselves have chosen. There are many examples of this in the Bible (Deut. 2:30; Josh. 11:20; 1 Sam. 2:25; 1 Kings 22:19-23; Rom. 9:18; 2 Thess. 2:11-12).

(3) God’s sovereignty in these matters is actually a cause for hope. If He is not sovereign over evil people, then there isn’t much point for our prayers for Him to do something when evil seems to prevail. But if the Lord truly reigns, then we can rejoice (Ps. 97:1).

(4) God’s sovereign hardening of people in Isaiah’s day so that Isaiah was commissioned to an apparently fruitless ministry (Isa
6:8-11) was a stage in God’s “strange work” (Carson’s words, based on Isa. 28:21-22) that brought His ultimate redemptive purposes to pass. Paul argues somewhat similarly in Romans 9:22-33.

The application is that the unbelief and evil deeds of sinners never frustrate the purposes of our sovereign God, but actually fulfill His purposes (1 Pet. 2:8). While many details in the Book of Revelation are hard to understand, one clear point is that even the worldwide evil and deception of the antichrist fit into and accomplish God’s purpose for the ages. Like those who killed Jesus, the antichrist will only “do whatever [God’s] hand and [His] purpose predestined to occur.” Then God will judge him and cast him into the lake of fire. To the persecuted church, the Lord commands (Rev. 2:10), “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

Thus we’ve seen that people do not believe in Jesus because they reject the light that God has given them, resulting in God’s judicially blinding them even more. In the next three verses we see that some see Jesus’ glory and believe in Him, whereas others profess to believe, but their focus is not on Jesus’ glory.

3. People believe in Christ because God has granted them some vision of Christ’s glory (John 12:41).

John 12:41: “These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him.” That’s a remarkable statement! John is probably referring both to Isaiah 53, where Isaiah saw Jesus’ glory as the suffering servant; and to Isaiah 6, where Isaiah saw God in glory on His throne. John is saying that Isaiah saw what the Jews of Jesus’ day missed, namely that He would be glorified by His suffering for our sins (John 12:23), but He is also the exalted One whom Isaiah saw, high and lifted up in Isaiah 6. But the remarkable thing is, John identifies Jesus with the Lord (Yahweh) on His throne! In 2 Corinthians 4:4, 6, Paul writes,

“...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... 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.

Paul is saying that Satan has blinded unbelievers so that they
cannot see the glory of Christ. But when we believe, it is because
God has shone in our hearts to reveal His glory in Christ. Tying in
with John, Isaiah was granted a vision of Jesus’ glory. While our
vision of His glory will not compare with Isaiah’s vision, or John’s
(Rev. 1:12-18), or Paul’s (2 Cor. 12:3-4), the beginning of faith is
when God opens your eyes to see something of Jesus’ glory. When
you see His glory on the cross, you believe in Him for eternal life.

But there is one sticky matter left in our text:

4. **Some profess to believe in Jesus, but their focus is on the
glory of man, not on the glory of God (12:42-43).**

John 12:42-43: “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.”

The sticky issue is whether John is describing true believers or
not. Some emphasize “believed” and argue that John is talking
about men like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, who were
secret believers for fear of the Jews (John 19:38-39). They would
say that they were saved, although their faith was defective.

But I would contend that while these rulers later may have
come to saving faith, at this point John is describing men who were
not yet saved. We saw this “non-saving belief” back in John 2:23-
25, where many believed in Jesus but He didn’t entrust Himself to
them. Those verses set the stage for Jesus’ interview with Nicodemus.
We saw the same thing in John 8:31-59, where John says that
the Jews believed in Jesus, but they clearly do not believe in a sav-
ing way. John’s comment here about these men loving the approval
of men, not of God, goes back to John 5:44, where Jesus asked His
opponents, “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?” (The word translated “approval” in John 12:43 is liter-
ally, “glory,” which stands in contrast to John 12:23, 28, & 41.)

Added to this are Jesus’ words in Mark 8:38, “For whoever is
ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful genera-
tion, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.” These Pharisees would not confess Jesus because of their fear of being put out of the synagogue and their love of man’s glory over God’s glory. Unless they later became willing to confess Christ whatever the cost, I contend that their faith was not saving faith.

Why does John include verses 42 & 43? Perhaps to warn those who say they believe, but are afraid to confess Christ, that they will face Jesus in judgment someday (John 12:48). He wants us to see that true faith sees Jesus’ glory and confesses Him, no matter what the cost. True Christians are not ashamed to confess Christ before this adulterous and sinful generation. Man’s approval may last a few years; God’s approval lasts forever.

Conclusion

Here are four summary applications:

(1) Are you obeying the light that God has given you or could you be suppressing the truth because you love your sins? This is a danger both for those who haven’t trusted in Christ, but also for those of us who have. It’s easy to dodge the truths in Scripture that confront your sins, but doing so will stall your growth.

(2) Are you trusting the Lord even when He does things that don’t fit your expectations? Evil men may wrong you, but God’s sovereign purpose will prevail.

(3) When you share Christ, pray that God will open blind eyes. Apart from His grace, the human heart is blind and hardened. Salvation is from the Lord.

(4) If you have not believed in Jesus to save you from your sins, you can’t blame God. Cry out to Him to open your eyes to the glory of Jesus crucified for sinners. Beg God to give you saving faith.
Application Questions

1. Some emphasize God’s sovereignty to the neglect of human responsibility. Others do the reverse. Why must we hold both in tension? Cite some Scriptures that reflect this tension.

2. Some argue that God never violates man’s “free will.” Agree or disagree? Cite Scripture to support your answer.

3. Is there a difference between making a decision to trust in Christ and true conversion? If so, what’s the difference?

4. Should we give up on someone who has rejected the gospel, assuming that God has judicially blinded him, or should we keep appealing to him to repent and believe? Biblical support?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2014, All Rights Reserved.