

# Unbelief, the Sin of Sins

JOHN 12:37-43

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One Bible Dictionary describes the sin of unbelief as follows:

"Unbelief of the testimony of God makes him a liar, and is a sin of the greatest enormity. It is the work of a depraved and guilty heart; for no one without this bias could reject the abundant witness God furnishes of the truth of his word. Especially is unbelief towards an offered Savior an unspeakable crime, justly sealing the condemnation of him who thus refuses to be saved."

The passage we are looking at today contains the last public preaching of our Lord in the book of John. What was the response to all that Jesus taught and did among the Jews? Verse 37 says, "*But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him.*" This is proof of the depravity of the human heart that it can remain unbelieving even while face to face with God the Son and His miracles. We need not wonder why people hear the gospel and reject it today. The heart of man is still wicked. Unbelief is a great evil. Hebrews 3:12 says, *Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.* Unbelief is a root sin. It is the "**sin of all sins.**"

Unbelief is the sin that the Serpent tempted Eve with when he said to her in Genesis 3:1, "*Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?*" Satan's first temptation of mankind was to try and get Eve to doubt the word of God, to question it, indeed to not believe it. 1 Peter 5:8 tells us to, *Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.* If the devil is still seeking to devour us, how might he do that? By getting us to doubt God's holy word, to tempt us to unbelief. That is why Peter follows up his warning with practical advice on what to do when he attacks us: 1 Peter 5:9 tells us to, *Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.* We resist the devil by remaining *steadfast in the faith*. The best defense against unbelief is a good offense! Seek to strengthen your faith daily and determine to remain steadfast in it.

Verse 38 says that the Jews didn't believe in Him "*that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled.*" Their unbelief, which they themselves were responsible for, had been predicted by the Lord through Isaiah long ago. Therefore, no one should be surprised that not many of the Jews responded to the gospel of Christ. God had said it would be this way. What was that word of Isaiah? John quoted first from Isaiah 53:1, which said, "*Lord, who has believed our report?*" You see, this rejection of Jesus by the Jews did not mean the failure of His mission. It was all part of God's plan. He was rejected so that He might go to the cross and purchase our salvation.

When Isaiah asks why there are few who believe the Gospel, he does so before the Lord in prayer, with astonishment and grief in his heart. When we see that few believe the gospel in our own day, it should not surprise us, but it ought to grieve us and cause us to cry out to God in prayer with Isaiah. Calvin comments, "**Let us therefore groan and complain along with the Prophet, and let us be distressed with grief when we see that our labor is unprofitable, and let us complain before God.**" Psalm 126:5 says, *Those who sow in tears Shall reap in joy.* We ought to weep over those who are unbelieving. We ought to weep over lost souls, pleading with God to give them the gift of faith. And yet we must not lose heart when people hear the gospel and go

their own way in unbelief. Keep praying, keep sowing the gospel seed, and surely some will be saved, even if it is only a few.

*"And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?"* No one can come to God but by the power of the Holy Spirit. The arm of the Lord represents his might, his power. When God chooses to exercise His power in the heart of the unbeliever, they will believe! God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy. First of all, this should cause us to greatly rejoice if the Lord has given us the gift of faith and we have been converted to Christ! We do not deserve God's great mercy any more than those wicked Jews did in Jesus' day! How thankful and how humbled I ought to be, that God would save a wretch like me. Isaiah is stating two sides of the same coin of truth which the Lord taught many times in John's gospel. Those two sides are: Only those who believe will be saved, and only those who are drawn by God's power will believe.

In verse 39 John says, *"Therefore they could not believe."* Does this mean that God prevented them from believing? Not at all. That they couldn't believe was entirely their own fault. What does God have to do to a person in order to keep them from believing in His Son? Nothing. All people naturally love sin and do not want to trust in Christ. They **could not** believe because they **would not** believe. They were spiritually blind and could not see because their hearts were not right. They could not believe because their hearts were enslaved to sin. Those who refuse to believe in Christ have only themselves to blame.

But verse 40 goes on to add something further into the mix. *"He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, Lest they should see with their eyes, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them."* Scripture teaches us that God sometimes gives a person over to his sin. God does not cause anyone to sin. But if he removes his restraining grace, their hearts will become even more hardened. Verse 40 is what we refer to as a judicial hardening. God simply leaves them alone to wander in their own blindness and hardness of heart. There are people who might think to themselves, **"I wish God would just leave me alone and let me be!"** That would be the most awful thing that could ever happen to a soul - to be left alone to go its own way. The way that we are all inclined to go is away from God and that road is the road to hell.

Don't ever wish that God would leave you alone! You might get what you ask for! Thank the Lord for his convicting grace, for sending friends, family member and ministers to remind you of your sin and need of salvation! If you still feel the guilt of your sins and mourn your lack of faith, thank God! That means you have not yet been given over to your sins. That means there is hope for you. But the sinner who does not repent of sin and repeatedly refuses to surrender to Jesus Christ, is on dangerous ground. That is why it is so important to turn to the Lord and to seek the Lord while he may be found. Tomorrow may be too late.

All God has to do to harden us is to remove His convicting, restraining grace and we will harden ourselves. And remember, God never arbitrarily hardens anyone. J.C. Ryle said, **"Those whom He is said to harden and blind will always be found to be persons whom He had previously warned, exhorted, and constantly summoned to repent."** If He hardens anyone, it is only after many offers of His mercy and grace. If God hardens anyone, they deserve it and "they asked for it," just as Pharaoh did when he kept hardening his own heart towards God.

How can a person know when they are in danger of being hardened in sin? First of all,

when they have heard the law's warnings and the gospel's promises repeatedly, but refused to heed God's word. If friends and ministers have spoken to them about the Lord Jesus and they have ignored them and rejected Christ many times over a long period, then they are in danger of being hardened. Hebrews warns us, "TODAY, IF YOU WILL HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS." If you don't want to be hardened, then don't harden your heart!

Moving on in our passage, verse 41 says "*These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him.*" He saw the glory of Christ. The prediction of verse 40 was taken from Isaiah chapter six. The context was Isaiah's vision of the Lord. Isaiah 6:1 says, "*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple.*" Isaiah saw Christ on the throne of heaven and called Him Lord. It must mean that He is equal with God - that He is God. Here is another wonderful proof of the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is what is often referred to as a Theophany. A theophany is a visible manifestation of God usually restricted to the Old Testament. One scholar writes that "*Indeed, there is reason to believe that the theophanies of the OT were, all of them, manifestations of the pre-incarnate Word.*"<sup>1</sup> It would be good to read the sixth chapter of Isaiah in its entirety. There you will find a description of the Glory of the Lord, where the angels cry out "*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!*" There you will read that the doorposts of that heavenly temple were shaken by the voice and the place was filled with smoke. There you will see that the prophet Isaiah was completely undone by that sight, and saw that he was unclean in the sight of God. Isaiah said, "*For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts.*" Oh that God would give us a spiritual understanding of the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ! If we had eyes to see by faith that One that Isaiah saw in his vision, our unbelief would vanish!

Verse 42 says, "*Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue.*" Many of the rulers believed. We don't know what kind of faith they had. It was suspect because they were not willing to confess Christ publicly. It could be that it was not true saving faith. On the other hand, some of these rulers might have been true believers who had a very weak faith. They were not filled with the courage that they would later possess. Didn't even Peter deny the Lord? He did not gain new courage to confess Christ until after Pentecost. Nicodemus was fearful but later seemed to gain courage to confess Christ.

Sometimes new Christians don't know what to say or, in their immaturity, are afraid to speak up for Christ. The first two years after I was converted to Christ I hardly said a word to anyone about Jesus. I am sure I was saved then. But I am also sure that I was not pleasing to God and needed to repent of the sin of silence. Why were these Jewish rulers unwilling to confess Christ? Because of the Pharisees, who had the power to kick them out of the synagogue. The synagogue meant a lot to the Jews - it was the center of social and religious life. If they were excommunicated from it they wouldn't have much of a life.

The ultimate reason why these rulers wouldn't confess Christ is in verse 43: "*for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.*" What about you? Do the people you know, know you are a Christian? Do they ever hear about Christ from your lips? A quiet Christian is a

1 Alvah Hovey, *Commentary on John*, p. 261.

disobedient Christian. Gordon Keddie writes, "**Telling no one but yourself that you believe in Jesus is arguably just a subtle version of rejecting Him, whatever the true state of your soul. A secret believer is unidentifiable as a believer.**" Those who are afraid to confess Christ before men need to make up their mind. Either we begin to confess the Lord Jesus publicly or maybe we should not call ourselves Christians. Someone has said, "**Your faith is a great theory until it costs you something.**"<sup>2</sup>

I know from personal experience that the praise of men has kept me from speaking up many times for the Lord. What then is the cure for this? Of course we must reverse course and love the praise of God more than the praise of men! Remember Moses, who grew up in Egypt, in the house of Pharaoh. He had great wealth, education, privilege and power. He had a lot to lose. Hebrews says that he, "*esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.*" It is a choice, really. Do we care more about our reputation or Christ's reputation? Are we more committed to our place and position in this world or our place in God's kingdom?

As we close, I want to remind us all that unbelief is a great and a grave sin. Unbelief keeps us from Christ and His salvation. Unbelief turns us into hardened sinners. Unbelief is a source of many other great evils in the world. Unbelief keeps us from confessing Christ before men. Revelation 21:8 warns, "*But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.*" Brothers and sisters in the Lord, may God give us grace to repent of unbelief! May God stir up the gift of faith in each and every believer here this morning. And may God give the gift of saving faith to those who are lost in sin, that they might turn in to receive the Lord Jesus, who is the image and glory of God and the Savior of the World.

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon Keddie, *John*, vol. 1, p. 487.