

WHEN BELIEF IS UNBELIEF

John 8:31-38 (No. 49)

Treasuring Christ Church – Pastor Boyd Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

There is a cloud that hangs over the Gospel of John. The cloud is that Jesus “came to his own, but his own people did not receive him” (1:11). Again and again, Jesus plainly offers himself to his people as their Messiah and their Savior. Yet again and again, his people reject him.

What a God we have that he would come to a people he knew would scorn him! What a God we have that he would lay down his life for people who were his enemies! What a God we have that he would give the dead and those enslaved to sin life and freedom!

One of my hopes as we study the Gospel of John is that you see so many compelling portraits of Jesus in this book that you become increasingly enthralled with his majesty. I want you to be able to say along with the Apostle John (whom Jesus loved), “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

But we know that not everyone sees Jesus as the one they love. It pains us especially when family or close friends disregard Jesus. Perhaps they’ve been exposed to the light of Jesus, but in their blindness they have not seen his beauty. We’ve known people who have seemed to follow Jesus, only to turn back from him later in life. We’ve known people who have made professions of faith, but whose lives do not match. Sometimes it’s difficult to know who is truly a Christian and who is not.

Jesus told us that it would be like this. In Matthew 13, he told a parable of the wheat and the tares (weeds). The parable teaches the truth that in this time between Jesus’ first coming and second coming, it will be difficult at times to know who is a true Christian and who is false.

Matthew 13:24–30: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, “Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”’

The wheat represents true believers. The weeds represent false believers. Jesus gives a fuller explanation of the parable beginning in verse 36, but the thing to see for our purposes is that this is a time when true believers and false believers will be in the church and it won’t always be possible to discern the true from the false.

Nevertheless, is there a test that reveals whether someone is a true disciple of Jesus or a false disciple? Yes, there is. There is a mark of true saving faith. In our passage, Jesus tells us the

test of genuine faith.

Text

John 8:31–38: "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father."

Recap

Recall that in John 8, Jesus is at the temple proclaiming that he is the light of the world and exposing the spiritual blindness of the Jews.

So far, their response to him hasn't been positive:

- They've rejected his claims about himself as invalid for lack of witnesses.
- They've challenged him to produce his earthly father (who was likely dead) to testify about Jesus.
- They've sought to arrest him.
- They've suspected him of considering suicide.
- They've challenged his identity.

But at the end our study last week came a ray of hope. There was a group of Jews who *seemed* to respond positively to his teaching.

In 8:30, we read, "As he was saying these things, many believed in him."

On its face, that sounds as if there were Jews converted right there—that his message was getting through to many of them.

But one lesson we've learned in our study of the Gospel of John is that not all belief in Jesus is saving belief. There is a kind of belief in Jesus that is fickle, shallow, superficial, and is not the kind of faith that saves. Was their belief in Jesus evidence of their conversion? Or were they merely won over by Jesus' persuasiveness, yet uncommitted to following his teaching?

Jesus wasn't content to let them go on believing, if their belief in him wasn't real. Unlike many church growth strategies today, Jesus never sought to gain crowds of followers who were not genuine believers. To those who were superficially attracted to him, he was always throwing stumbling blocks in their way. To one would-be follower who said, "I will follow you wherever you go," Jesus said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another would-be follower who said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father," Jesus said, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." To yet another would-be follower who said, "I will follow you,

Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home,” Jesus said, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Church growth experts today would say, “Lighten up, Jesus! Get them in the door first with something attractive. Make the barriers to entry easy and comfortable. Woo them and win them before you challenge them.”

But this was not Jesus’ approach. Rather, Jesus proclaimed a gospel that false converts rejected. Jesus said to would-be followers, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” Do you proclaim a gospel that false converts would reject? Or is your gospel a gospel only of the benefits of following Jesus but none of the costs of following Jesus?

Jesus wasn’t interested in drawing a crowd of followers to him if it meant that his followers could keep him at arms-length. Many would want to ride the coattails of Jesus into heaven, but otherwise live their lives on their own terms. They’ll take Jesus if he saves them, but they won’t take Jesus if he makes demands on their lives. They’ll gladly accept him as Savior, but want nothing to do with him if he must necessarily also be their Lord. Jesus would have none of this kind of “believing in Jesus.”

So, in verse 31, he turned his focus from all those at the temple to those who had responded favorably to his message and challenged these Jews who believed in him to test the genuineness of their faith. Were they real disciples or false disciples?

As we study this passage, I want you to see, first, the proof of true belief.

I. THE PROOF OF TRUE BELIEF

John 8:31: “So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples . . .”

The proof of true belief—the proof of being a true disciple of Jesus—is abiding in his word. If you abide in his word, that is the proof that you are his disciple.

What does he mean by “abide in my word?” Abide simply means to hold fast, continue, remain. In fact, the same word is translated in verse 35 as “remain”: “The slave does not remain [=abide] in the house forever; the son remains [=abides] forever.” And Jesus’ reference to “my word” means his teaching. The truth that he taught. The commands that he gave.

So Jesus says that the proof of being a real, genuine, true disciple of his is that you remain, hold fast to, continue in his teaching. That is, a true disciple of Jesus continues to obeys his commands, goes on walking in the light of his truth, loves and longs for Jesus’ truths, finds his teaching precious and—very important—continues to be *controlled* by Jesus’ teaching. A true disciple doesn’t reject Jesus’ teaching. He doesn’t abandon it, ignore it, or minimize Jesus’ influence in his life. In a word, a true disciple of Jesus *perseveres* in Jesus’ teaching. This is the test: Do you persevere in what Jesus taught? A professing Christian who has little or no regard for the word of God is no Christian at all.

Professions, confessions, and affections are unreliable indicators of true saving faith. Emotions can be stirred up by the crescendo of a song, the thundering of a motivational speaker, or the poignancy of a moment. But the test Jesus gives is this: Do you hold fast to my teaching? True Christians abide in Jesus' word. The test wasn't for Jesus' sake, but theirs. He could see into a person's heart—into their expression of belief—and know whether it was genuine.

In 2:23–25, when he had been in Jerusalem for Passover and performed various signs, a similar thing happened—"many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing." But in that passage, John cautioned us about reading too much into their belief. He wrote, "But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man."

That phrase, "Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them" means that although they believed in Jesus, Jesus didn't believe in them. Jesus had no faith in their faith. He knew it was superficial and that they were attracted to him because of his signs.

True disciples are attached to Jesus at a deeper level than his miracles or what he does for them. They cling to his teaching because they have found life in his teaching and it has become precious to them and they love Jesus.

But Jesus already knew that these Jews in chapter 8 who believed in him were not true disciples. Throughout his ministry, Jesus taught that there would be people who would attach themselves to him and the church and who would be false disciples. In his parable of the soils, he said that one response to the word of God was like rocky ground.

Matthew 13:20–21: "As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and *immediately receives it with joy*, yet he has no root in himself, but *endures for a while*, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he *falls away*."

In other words, this person appears to be a true disciple at first because of he is so eager and glad to receive God's word. But when pressure comes because he holds to Jesus' teaching, he falls away—he does not abide.

Jesus knew that these Jews in John 8 were these kinds of people. His word had been sown on rocky ground. In verse 37, Jesus says that his word finds no place in them. His word had not taken root in them. True disciples, on the other hand, abide in his word.

Just the other day, a hip pastor who leads a hip church in New York went on a day time talk TV program. They asked him about abortion. And he didn't even have the moral courage to say that it was sinful. This same pastor has previously gone to great lengths to refuse to take a stand on same-sex marriage and homosexuality.

What's going on there? What's going on is that he is demonstrating that he is a false disciple because he does not abide in God's word. And many pastors and Christians are being exposed for what they really are because as the culture turns against Jesus' teaching, they deny his teaching to stay friendly with the world.

True disciples not only abide, but also (v. 32) "know the truth." By abiding in Jesus' teaching,

the truthfulness of his teaching is clear and you will come into greater understanding of the truth. In other words, you gain understanding in God's truth as you hold onto and obey the truth that you already know. Some of you may be stuck in your understanding of truth because you are disobedient to the truth you already know.

Jesus continues, "The truth will set you free." The truth liberates. The truth will release you from bondage. Set you free from what? That was the exact question on the minds of the Jews.

In verse 33, we move from the proof of true belief to the protest of false belief.

II. THE PROTEST OF FALSE BELIEF

John 8:33: "They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?""

Historically, the Jews had been enslaved many times—by the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, the Syrians, and the Romans. They had been enslaved in one way or another by virtually every major world power since Moses' day.

They understood, however, that Jesus wasn't talking about physical or political bondage. They grasped that he was talking about spiritual enslavement. The insinuation that they were in any sense spiritually enslaved angered them. They strongly objected to the idea that they needed to be freed. Their rage is felt in the tone of their question—it's an ugly challenge. The tone is something like, "How do *you*, of all people, say, 'You will become free'?!?" Their pride had been offended.

They reacted the same way that all people who feel spiritually superior react—they justified themselves. Here, they justified themselves by appealing to their superior ethnicity: "We are offspring of Abraham." That is to say, "We are the sons of the kingdom of God. We have a right to the kingdom. We belong. We are heirs of God's house. We don't need spiritual liberation." But they needed to be free from bondage, even if they didn't know it.

These same Jews who had just believed in him were already chafing at his teaching. Already, they were demonstrating that they would not hold to his teaching, they would not abide in his word, and, thus, they show they were not true disciples.

From the proof of true belief to the protest of false belief, we finally move to the practice of false belief.

III. THE PRACTICE OF FALSE BELIEF

Here, Jesus explained that they were indeed enslaved.

John 8:34: "Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."

"Truly, truly, I say to you" are words of a solemn address. He was utterly serious. Ignoring his words would lead to damnation—"Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." The word "practices" is literally the word for "do." Whoever is a doer of sin is a slave to sin. The word

is in the present tense, indicating that the one whose life practice is sin is the one who is enslaved.

Older versions of the ESV and the current NASB translate this: "Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." That's not the best translation because the idea isn't that a single act of sin represents slavery. *But* everyone who is *committed* to sin is a slave to sin. Those who have a devotion to sin are enslaved.

The Apostle John says the same thing in his first epistle:

1 John 3:4: "Everyone who *makes a practice of sinning* also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness."

1 John 3:8–9: "Whoever *makes a practice of sinning* is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God *makes a practice of sinning*, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God."

Enslavement to sin was our condition before we came to faith. Everyone who has not been freed by the Son is enslaved to sin.

Augustine said that of all the kinds of slavery, slavery to sin is the worst because although one who is physically enslaved may attempt to flee his master, the one enslaved to sin has nowhere to flee and indeed is devoted to continue obeying his dark master.

But for those of us who have truly trusted in Christ, Jesus has freed us from the power of sin. Paul addresses this in Romans 6.

Romans 6:12-13: "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness."

Because you have been freed from the power of sin, don't go on letting it reign in you. Don't let it continue to be your master. In Christ, you now have the power to fight against it because you've been brought from death to life.

Romans 6:17: "But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed."

That is, you have been freed by Christ and you now abide in Christ's teaching—you have a desire at the very depth of your being to obey Christ.

For these Jews, the dominating and controlling influence in their lives was not Jesus' teaching, but their slavery to sin. Their belief in Jesus wasn't the kind that fully yielded to him as Lord. Their master wasn't Christ. Their master was sin.

Jesus then used an illustration to show that because they were slaves to sin, they did not belong to the Father's kingdom.

John 8:35–36: "The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

In a household, the slaves had no guarantee that they would remain in the home. They had no security. They had no rights. But sons are sons forever. They belong to the household. They have the privilege of remaining forever.

True, the Jews were descendants of Abraham. But because they were slaves of sin, they had no place in the household of God. The only one who could bring them freedom and make them children of God was the Son—the Son of God who stood before them.

Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 61:1–2 that spoke of the coming Messiah. Isaiah wrote: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, *to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound. . .*"

This was the very same passage that Jesus read from in the synagogue in Nazareth. And, there, in Luke 4:21, Jesus added: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

If the Son sets you free, you have true freedom—freedom indeed. Then you will remain in God's household forever. True freedom is found only in Christ.

2 Corinthians 3:17: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

Romans 8:2: "The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death."

Galatians 5:1: "For freedom Christ has set us free. . ."

If they needed any more proof that they were enslaved to sin and not sons of the kingdom, Jesus provided it in the next two verses. He said in v. 37: "I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you." Not only would they not abide in Jesus' teaching and obey his truth, but they also wanted to kill the Truth. Why? Because there was no room in their evil, dark hearts for the light of the world.

He went on (v. 38): "I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father." There are two contrasts in this verse to note. The first is that Jesus speaks of what he has *seen*; they do what they have *heard*. The truth that Jesus taught didn't come from what he heard from his Father, but from what he had seen. That is, Jesus' testimony is eye-witness testimony. He came from the very presence of the Father. No one could see the face of the Father and live, but Jesus was no ordinary man. He had been in the presence of the Father and Jesus' teaching came from the Father.

The second contrast is that Jesus and the Jews had different fathers. We'll learn more about that next time. But it is enough to say that because they had a different father, they were from different families.

CONCLUSION

So it's clear that these Jews who had believed in him were not true disciples. Their belief in Jesus wasn't saving belief. The proof of that is that they would not abide in his word.

But the test isn't for them alone. The test is for everyone who claims to believe in Jesus. The only ones who have a saving faith in Christ are those who continue in Jesus' teaching. They hold fast to his word. They seek to obey his commands. That's the proof that you are his.