

“Fear of God vs. Fear of Man”

John 12:36-50

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

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.

⁴⁴ And Jesus cried out and said, “Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. ⁴⁵ And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. ⁴⁶ I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. ⁴⁷ If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. ⁴⁸ The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. ⁴⁹ For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. ⁵⁰ And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.” – John 12:36-50, ESV

Intro: The Power of Fear

Fear is a powerful motivator. Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” That’s obviously a false statement, but FDR said it because he knew fear can paralyze people from acting and could also cause them to act irrationally. The Great Depression was made worse by fear, as people stampeded on banks, demanding all of their deposits back in cash, people who had money often kept it in cash in their homes, and most people were too terrified to invest in the stock market.

Yet the truth is that the right, healthy fear also can motivate us toward right action. We are kept from doing foolish and destructive things by a healthy fear. One of the main reasons why drivers under the age of 25 have a much higher rate of accidents is because too many of them have no fear. I know this from personal experience, as my tendency to disregard caution and not live in fear caused many accidents in the first 5 years of my driving life.

Perhaps one fear that should grip all our hearts more than it does is the fear of the dark. I don't mean literal darkness, of course, but the spiritual darkness of living life in ignorance and sin, apart from fellowship with God. In today's passage, we have Jesus' last moments of public ministry, a final summary of the reactions of the crowds to Him and His final words to those crowds.

I. A Sad Reality

The sad reality at the end of Jesus' public ministry is that most people did not believe in Him. He had done many public miracles, He had spoken as no one else ever had, He had lived a life of sinless perfection, but most people persisted in their unbelief.

This fact was a scandal for the early church as they witnessed to their culture. As Christians proclaimed the Gospel, three common objections were raised:

1. Jesus didn't do the things everyone expected a Messiah to do.
2. If Jesus was the Messiah, why was He killed in humiliation on a Roman cross?
3. If Jesus was the Messiah who did and said such wonderful things, why did most people and almost all of the Jewish leadership reject Him?

Much of the message of the Gospels is aimed at answering these objections. John's Gospel focuses much attention on these objections, and this passage culminates this theme John has been developing throughout His Gospel. John has focused our attention on the words of Jesus clearly revealing who He is and on the miraculous signs of Jesus, clearly confirming His claims.

As he has revealed Jesus through His words and actions, John has been displaying many ways Jesus as Messiah might not have met the expectations of the people but did powerfully fulfill the Scriptures in Himself, as the Word made Flesh:

- He fulfills the manna given in the wilderness by being Himself the Bread of Life, something He proved by feeding the 5,000.
- He fulfills the water from the rock in the wilderness by being Himself the fountain of living water.
- He fulfills the Scriptural themes of light and glory by being Himself the light of the world, which He proved by healing a man born blind, and by revealing God's glory in Himself.
- He reverses the curse of the fall and fulfills the themes of resurrection in the Scripture by being Himself the resurrection and the life, which He confirms by healing the paralytic and raising Lazarus from the dead after he had been in the grave for four days.

a. They Still Did Not Believe

Yet, the sad reality is this: Despite all Jesus had said and done, the leadership of the Jewish people and the majority of the crowds did not believe in Him. John tells us *“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?”*

To explain why they did not believe, John quotes the opening of Isaiah 53, Isaiah’s famous Suffering Servant Song. Bible scholar Craig Evans has uncovered 12 references, allusions or overtones to the Suffering Servant Song here in John 12. As Jesus is turning from His public ministry toward the cross, John has Isaiah 53 clearly in mind in this chapter.

In referencing Isaiah 53, John is effectively answering all three common objections: Jesus is doing exactly what Messiah should be doing. God foretold in Isaiah that His Messiah would suffer and die for the sins of God’s people and that He would be rejected by God’s people, who would not believe the message they were told. Jesus had to be rejected in order that He might suffer, and He had to suffer in order that we might be saved.

b. They Could Not Believe

But then John goes on to say something very controversial, which some have had a difficult time accepting:

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.*

Wait a minute! They could not believe? Is that fair? Why didn’t God give them a chance? Here John quotes from Isaiah 6, which is God’s commission of Isaiah. Isaiah was told when He was commissioned by God that the people would not listen to him. In fact, he’s told by God that the people’s rejection of his ministry and message would serve as part of God’s judgment against the people.

But is it fair? How can God blind eyes and harden hearts? Well, what’s clear from the life and ministry of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Jesus is that God does not do this against anyone’s will. They cannot see because they will not see, and they then will not see because they cannot see. God confirms their

choice by hardening them in that stubborn, foolish, rebellious choice. He also foresees this choice and foretells His purposes of judgment in it.

Far from being unfair, this is an act of supremely wise justice, and it should be sobering to all of us to see this pattern. People who reject God's message are often judicially hardened by God in that rejection, their hearts of stone and blinded eyes unable to see the truth and respond in repentance and faith and love.

What John says immediately after he quotes Isaiah 6 is worth noting: He says "Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him." Whose glory did Isaiah see and of whom did Isaiah speak? John says Isaiah saw Christ's glory and spoke of Christ. When he saw the glory of the Lord filling the Temple, this was a vision of Christ, who is the glory of God and who fills His new and living Temple with His own presence by His Holy Spirit, something pictured on the Day of Pentecost.

II. A Sobering Wake-Up Call

Thankfully, not everyone who saw and heard Jesus failed to believe. While the rejection of Christ and God's hardening in judgment was foretold by Isaiah and was true for most of the leaders and the crowd, it was not true of everyone. We know of Sanhedrin members like Joseph of Arimathea, who asked for Christ to be buried in his tomb and Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night in John 3, who tried to speak up for Him in John 7, and who would anoint Jesus' body for burial with myrrh and aloes with Joseph. If there were two such men among the ruling council, surely many among the crowds also believed.

So, why didn't they speak up and work together to stop the gross injustice against Jesus? John tells us:

a. Many Believed, But They Did Not Confess It

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.

That's a stunning indictment. Another way to put it is this: They feared man more than they feared the Lord. Proverbs 29:25 says, "*The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.*"

These secret believers were caught in the snare of the fear of man, and they were too paralyzed by that fear to speak up and defend Jesus and publicly proclaim their faith in Him. Now, before we judge them too harshly, we need to ask ourselves: How many times have we turned back from making a public profession out of fear of what other people will think or say? We know we should say something and the words are on the tip of our tongues, but we swallow them because we're

embarrassed and we don't want to be rejected. None of us likes to be disliked. We all like people to like us, right?

I love the way John clarifies the issue for us here: Instead of focusing on what we're afraid of, he focuses on what we're desiring. What are we hoping to gain by keeping silent and avoiding offense? We want to be liked. We want others to think highly of us. We want the glory that comes from man.

Well, isn't it far better to please our Heavenly Father? Isn't it far better to hear Him say, "Well done!?" Isn't His glory worth far more than all the glory and accolades the world can give. We've all seen clearly that those who stand for Christ will not win the applause of the world, but how does that compare to hearing the applause of heaven? Jesus was rejected all the way to the cross, despised and rejected by men, and yet He was able to say, "It is finished!" and "Into Your hands I commit My spirit." He died satisfied because He had done all His Father had given Him to do.

b. "Whoever Believes in Me"

Then Jesus offers His final call, His final message to the crowds:

⁴⁴ And Jesus cried out and said, "Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. ⁴⁵ And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. ⁴⁶ I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.

"Whoever believes" – Two simple and yet deeply powerful words. Jesus has said them over and over again, and so has John. Consider these verses:

- *But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, - John 1:12*
- *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. – John 3:14-16*
- *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. – John 5:24*
- *Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. – John 6:35*
- *Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" – John 7:38*

- *Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live – John 11:25*

The call is clear and open to all: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.

Here Jesus says “Whoever believes in Me believes in Him who sent Me.” To believe in Jesus is to believe in God the Father who sent Him. Conversely, to reject Jesus is to reject God the Father who sent Him.

“I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.” Those who do turn to Jesus in faith do not remain in darkness any longer. They have the light of life. They live and walk in the light of life.

c. **“The One Who Rejects Me”**

And yet -⁴⁷ If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. ⁴⁸ The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day.

Just as clear as the open invitation to come and believe in Jesus and have eternal life, equally clear is the consequence of rejecting Him. If you are here, hearing the words of Jesus today, and you do not keep them, you do not trust in Him, the very words of Jesus will stand against you as your judge on the last day.

Jesus says *“I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.”* This is the same language as John 3:17-18, *“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”*

Part of the key to understanding Jesus and coming to see the truth in Him is to understand and see how you stand without Him. If Jesus had never come into the world, if He had never lived, taught, worked miracles, died, and rose again, then what? Some people say, “Oh, I wish that God would just leave me alone. Let me have my own life the way I like it.” But do you know what that means? It means you live in condemnation because you remain willfully, stubbornly, in the darkness. Being left alone is being left without hope, without God in the world – no forgiveness for your sins, no reconciliation to your Heavenly Father, no peace, no eternal life.

And if you reject this message, the words of Jesus will indeed come back to haunt you: Didn't you hear very clearly that whoever believes in me has eternal life? Didn't you hear very clearly that whoever

believes in me becomes a child of God? Didn't you hear very clearly that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life? Yes, you heard!

But maybe you think, "I'm not ready yet. I don't want to give up my life and receive Jesus as my Lord." You would only say that if you believe your own ways are better than God's ways, your own life is better than the life Jesus offers in Himself, that the darkness is, in fact, better than the light. You would only say that if you are blind and hardened to your deep thirst, your insatiable hunger, your great guilt, your profound need for Jesus.

Jesus speaks to all of us this morning with the highest authority: *"⁴⁹ For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. ⁵⁰ And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me."*

Jesus speaks on the authority of the Father, and the Father's commandment is eternal life. God made you. He knows what you need. God loves you. He gave His Son for you. Listen to Him. Submit to His authority and obey His command.

Conclusion: Fear Either Paralyzes or Liberates

Will you have to surrender control of your own life? Yes. Will you have to stop living for the foolish and fleeting follies of this world? Yes. If you come to believe in Jesus, you profess Him as Lord of all and your Lord. Is that scary? It should be. We are called to the fear of the Lord.

But as we saw at the beginning, fear can motivate for good or for evil. In other words, some fear paralyzes and traps us, but other fear sets us free! David said in Psalm 27:

*The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?*

The one who comes to truly fear the Lord needs never to fear anyone or anything else.

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever! – Psalm 111:10*

*In the fear of the LORD one has strong confidence,
and his children will have a refuge.*

²⁷ *The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life,
that one may turn away from the snares of death. – Proverbs 14:26-27*

I invite you, in the name of Jesus, to the fear that liberates, to the fear that gives understanding, strong confidence, a refuge, a fountain of life. Come, taste and see and enter into the fear of the Lord. Trust in Jesus!