

# Unbelief and Faith - radio sermon

(Matthew 13:54-58)

The text of our scripture today is Matthew 13:54-58. Let's read it together.

“**54** And when he was come into his own country, he taught them in their synagogue, insomuch that they were astonished, and said, Whence hath this *man* this wisdom, and *these* mighty works? **55** Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? **56** And his sisters, are they not all with us? Whence then hath this *man* all these things? **57** And they were offended in him. But Jesus said unto them, A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house. **58** And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief” (Matthew 13:54-58).

I've entitled this message, “Unbelief and Faith”.

This scripture teaches the evil of unbelief. I would like to consider three things in this message:

1. First, the Evil of Unbelief. It is a great sin against God.
2. Second, the Sadness of unbelief. It is cause for our greatest sadness.
3. Third, What is saving faith? What does the Bible mean when it says to “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ*” (Acts 16:31)?

## Introduction

The people in this scripture lived where Jesus grew up. They heard His wisdom. They saw His miracles. They were astonished and called His works “mighty.” But they willfully refused the clear evidence that He was sent of God, that He was Christ. Jesus' countrymen...

- Refused to recognize Him as God's Messiah, as if their recognition of Him was required. God's truth does not depend on our believing it. God is true

independent of man. But man refuses to believe unless God fits his mold, unless he can explain God to fit into his view of things.

- Masked their unbelief by making an issue of insignificant things. Men will make much of things that don't matter when their eternal souls are at stake.
- Were offended in Christ. They stumbled at their long-promised Messiah and fell under the judgment of God.
  - The Jews in Gal. 5:11 were offended at Paul's preaching of Christ crucified because salvation by Christ precludes anything man can contribute. They trusted their circumcision. But in Christ, God unmask man's hypocrisy and reveals his complete failure to earn God's acceptance by anything he can do. Since all men naturally trust a salvation that depends on them and leaves them in control, men are therefore offended by Christ.
- By their unbelief, they forfeited Christ's blessings.

Unbelief is willful rejection of God's testimony concerning His Son (1 John 5:10). It is refusal to believe the Gospel of Christ: that He alone is the only way men can be saved from the wrath of God, can please God and can know God (Acts 4:12).

We naturally think that failure to believe the Gospel is not a very bad sin. For example, is unbelief as bad as adultery? We think, "Surely if I am ignorant of God's truth, I can't be held accountable for not believing!?" Another reason we are inclined to excuse our unbelief is that we find so much of it in ourselves and in our loved ones. If unbelief is so common, it can't be all that bad, can it? If unbelief is common, isn't God responsible? Didn't He make me this way? If unbelief is sin, then isn't the fault with God? (I speak as a sinful man, Rom. 3:5.) Maybe you have thought, "When I stand before God, He will recognize that I did not believe because I had so many questions. I just couldn't believe! Therefore, I'll take my chances that God will consider my ignorance, and that I am not really worse than other people are. Surely He will not judge me for it." If God excuses the ignorance of your unbelief, what about your sin? Do you think the all holy God can excuse that? But it is not what you or I think. The only issue is what God thinks. What does the Bible say?

## Evil of unbelief

What does God think about man's failure to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ?

1. Genesis 3:1-6 records the first temptation and the first sin. The devil tempted Eve to doubt God. He said, "*Yea, hath God said*" (Gen. 3:1)? In its most basic form, unbelief is to doubt the truth of God's word. It is to doubt what God has said. But the devil went further. He not only suggested that God did not say what He did, but he twisted what God into a negative question to make it sound as if God had placed an unreasonable requirement on man. "*Hath God said you shall not eat of every tree*" (Gen. 3:1)? He suggested that either Eve was confused or that God was austere and unfair. "*Is it true that God has said, You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?*" Really?! The next thing satan did was to directly contradict God's word: "*You shall not surely die*" (Gen. 3:4)! Thus, in this we see how the evil one himself knows that **sin begins with a failure to believe God's word**. His temptation began by questioning the truth of God's word. Then it digressed to flatly contradicting God and His word: "*You shall not surely die!*" Finally, once God's word was denied, the devil called God's goodness into question. "*God knows that in the day you eat thereof you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil*" (Gen. 3:5). What was the devil's strategy? First, question that God spoke what He did. Second, doubt the truth of God's word. Third, flatly deny the truth. And fourth, call God's character into question. You know the story. Eve believed the devil's lie. In doing so, she failed to believe God. Therefore, unbelief was the first temptation and the first sin. God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). His word is the truth (Jn. 17:17). He is good in all of His ways and He only does wonderful things (Ps. 72:18). He created the world. He made man out of dirt. He created a beautiful garden and put man in it. He gave everything in the garden for man to enjoy for its beauty and for food. He created a woman for the man. God only withheld one thing from man: the one thing that would bring his death: to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Was God evil in any of this? Was He not rather supremely good? Isn't it good of God to forbid what causes our death? Therefore, when

Eve doubted God's word and doubted God's goodness, it was a very evil thing. **We see in this that unbelief is the first sin and the root of all sin.** Hebrews 3:12 says, "*Take heed lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.*" (Heb. 3:12).

2. The second example of unbelief is found in the nation of Israel. Once again, the evil of man's unbelief is seen against the backdrop of God's goodness. They were in the wilderness about to enter Canaan. God had delivered them from Egypt and its slavery. He had destroyed their enemies in the Red Sea. He gave the entire nation water to drink out of a rock. He fed them with bread from heaven. He guided them by His presence. He was a light to them by night and a cloud to them by day. But for all of the signs and wonder and goodness of God to Israel, they did not believe Him! In every trouble, they accused God of evil intent. Many times they said, "*You brought us into the wilderness to destroy us*" (Ex. 16:3). When God led them to the border of the promised land, Israel sent twelve men in to spy out the land. But ten of those men brought back an "evil report" (Num. 13:32) of unbelief. They instilled fear into the entire congregation by telling them there were formidable giants in the land. Yes, the land was good. Yes, it flowed with milk and honey. All was just as God has said. But they told them there were terrible and unconquerable giants in the land! They said, "*We saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight*" (Num. 13:33). From this account we learn the evil character of unbelief. (a) Unbelief looks upon itself through its own eyes and through the eyes of its enemies. That is, (b) unbelief measures God by itself. (c) Unbelief measures God's strength by its own weakness. (d) Unbelief measures God's goodness by its own evil heart. (e) Unbelief therefore accuses God of evil. (f) Unbelief can only believe God as far as human strength is able to do to fulfill His promise. What about us? Do we measure God's righteousness by our own? Do you see yourself as a grasshopper in the eyes of the giant of your own sin and God's law, or do you see your sin in light of what Christ has done? Israel looked upon their weakness in the eyes of their enemy. But faith looks upon its enemy through the eyes of God's word, His promise and His strength. Caleb and Joshua

gave the report of faith. They said, “*They are bread for us; their defense is departed from them, and the LORD is with us: fear them not*” (Num. 14:9)!

So far, we have learned these facts about unbelief:

- a. **Unbelief fails to believe God and His word.** Eve believed the lie of the devil. She did not believe the word of God, though she had it and understood it. Israel did not believe God could bring them into Canaan.
  - b. **Unbelief flatly denies God’s word.** The devil flatly denied God’s word. Eve believed his lie.
  - c. **Unbelief accuses God of evil!** Eve believed the devil’s suggestion that God withheld the fruit of one tree from them because He was keeping back a blessing. And Israel interpreted all of their troubles to mean that God intended evil against them (Job 2:10).
  - d. **Unbelief cannot believe God’s promise unless it can see a way in its own strength to fulfill that promise.** Unbelief requires something from itself to make God’s promise work. The Jews rejected Christ because they wanted God to bless them by what they did: circumcision, law-keeping, etc. (Gal. 5:11).
3. Now, let’s briefly look at the NT. In chapters Matthew 11, 12 and 13 we see unbelief again and again. In Matthew 11, for example, Jesus publicly commends John the Baptist. In so doing, He also underscores the importance of His own ministry. John warned Israel of the coming wrath of God. He told them to repent: to change their mind concerning the remission of sin. He pointed to Jesus and announced, “*The Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world*” (Jn. 1:29). But many rejected the testimony of God that John preached. They did not repent towards God and did not believe Christ (Acts. 20:21). When Jesus came, they rejected Him and His testimony. In Matthew 11, Jesus compares them to children playing games in the marketplace. John warned men. He exposed their hypocrisy and self-righteousness. He pointed them to Christ and Him crucified -- the Lamb of God. John’s message was as a mournful song to them. But Jesus preached the Gospel of His redeeming work to lost, ruined and helpless sinners (Matt.

9:13; 11:28). His message was as a melodious tune to sorrowful hearts. But in their unbelief, the Scribes and Pharisees were like naughty children who only seek their own way and cannot be pleased. Jesus compared their unbelief in rejecting John and Himself to notoriously evil Gentile cities. He said that in the day of judgment, it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah and for Tyre and Sidon than for them! What do we learn from this? We learn that **unbelief is stubborn, willful rejection of God's revealed truth**. We learn that **unbelief is more evil than the immorality of Sodom and Gomorrah and the idolatry of Tyre and Sidon**. The Jews in Jesus' day were proud of their standing before God. They based their confidence on having God's law and knowing it. But Jesus said having and knowing were of no value unless they kept it. Jesus exposed them. They disobeyed the law that they trusted. In their hypocrisy, they failed to see that they were spiritually wretched, poor, blind and naked before God (Rev. 3:17). Therefore, they did not come to Christ. His message was not good news to them. They did not think they needed Him or His mercy. They did not need God's Savior. Do you? Do I? Do we see ourselves utterly sinful and helpless before God? Do we see that apart from God's free and sovereign mercy in Christ, we will die in our sins? Do you call upon the Lord Jesus Christ to save you? Do I?

In these three examples, we see the evil of unbelief. Here are more clear statements from scripture that affirm just how bad unbelief is:

*“He that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son”* (1 John 5:9-10). **To not believe the Gospel concerning Christ is to claim that God is a liar!** That is the height of evil arrogance! For a sinful man to deny God whose word is Truth and who made me and upholds me by His word, is to take issue with the One in *“whose hand my breath is and whose are all my ways”* (Dan. 5:23). Is it not madness to assail the foundation on which my life and my eternity depend?!

In Romans 10:16, God says, “*Who hath believed our report?*” This is a quotation from Isaiah 53:1. The “report” is the Gospel. Isaiah prophesied that Christ would substitute Himself for His people, that He would offer Himself to God in their place, bear their sins, answer God’s justice, satisfy that justice to justify them by His obedience and suffering. Isaiah 53 is perhaps the greatest prophecy in all of scripture. It explains how Christ made atonement for the sins of His people (Isa. 53:8). It shows how God accepts from the Substitute all that He requires of those for whom He stands. It establishes that glorious truth that God’s people are one with their substitute who stood in their place. God looks upon Christ and receives from Christ all that He requires of His people. There is nothing in the universe more glorious than this: **Christ interposed Himself to answer God for all that His people owed, and to fulfill for them all that God required** (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 1:3; 2 Cor. 5:21). Believing this we will never cease to worship, praise and love God! He receives His people for Christ’s sake alone! He receives them as He receives His Son (Jn. 17:23; Eph. 2:5-6). Christ made satisfaction to God’s justice for the sins of His people (Gal. 3:13; Rom. 3:24-25). There is no greater love!

Now, in Romans 10:16 it says “*not all have obeyed the Gospel, for who hath believed our report?!*” **Isaiah 53 is the Gospel. Failure to believe the Gospel, therefore, is disobedience.** Thus, we see that unbelief is not a blameless crime. It is disobedience, and disobedience is my fault, not God’s! And it is not any ordinary disobedience. It is failure to believe God’s record of His Son! Unbelief is the claim that God is a liar (1 Jn. 5:10)! Unbelief is truly evil! It exceeds the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah. It exceeds the idolatry of Tyre and Sidon. It is failure to believe that Christ made full atonement for the sins of His people by substituting Himself in their place under the wrath of God (Gal. 3:13). Unbelief is willful disobedience to the only way God saves sinners!

## Sadness of Unbelief

We see now not only the evil of unbelief, but the sadness of it. Why is unbelief so sad? It is sad because unbelief opposes my own salvation! Paul told Timothy that “*The servant of the Lord must...instruct those that oppose themselves; if God*

*peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth*” (2 Tim. 2:24-25). The truth we must acknowledge is the Gospel of Christ and Him crucified: the truth about who Christ is, that He is God and man, and the truth about what He accomplished, the complete salvation of all of His people by His death on the cross. Paul told Timothy that men oppose themselves by disobeying this truth in unbelief. And he says that only God can “*give them repentance.*” The repentance that only God can give is believing Christ as He is revealed in the Gospel. Faith is “*acknowledging the truth*” of Christ as He is revealed in the Gospel. It is sad that though the Galatians heard so clearly from Paul of Christ that it was as if He had been crucified among them (Gal. 3:1-2). Yet they failed to obey the truth of the Gospel. They attempted to add and improve on what Christ accomplished by His death (Gal. 2:21; 3:1-2). Their unbelief confused them. They thought acceptance and perfection before God could be attained by an act they were able to perform, rather than the offering of Christ for His people. “*By one offering He hath perfected forever them that are sanctified*” (Col. 2:9-10; Heb. 10:14). Paul told them, “*Who hath bewitched you that you should not obey the truth before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently crucified among you?*”

Is anything sadder than sinners opposing their own salvation, or professing believers attempting to secure God’s blessings by their personal obedience? God’s wrath is upon all who refuse to believe God!

John 3:36 says “*He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him*” (John 3:36). Unbelief accuses God of evil. It makes God a liar and brings upon me the wrath of God. Unbelief hides from me the glory of God. It prevents me from knowing Jesus Christ and seeing God in Him! Therefore, there is nothing more evil or more sad than unbelief!

Another sad fact of unbelief is this: men do not naturally believe God. Since Adam sinned, all men are born into the world in unbelief. Rom. 11:32 says that “*God has concluded them all in unbelief*” (Rom. 11:32). “*Concluded*” means God has shut men up. Unbelief is man’s fault. It is a prison of our own making. That is sad. Only



God can deliver us from our unbelief. God will have men know that there is no way to escaping judgment for our sin except in Christ. In the prison of my unbelief, I cannot see how God can save me. I am so bad. I cannot see how He can look upon me with favor. He is of purer eyes than to behold evil (Hab. 1:13). How can God accept me, a sinner?! How can God receive me as righteous? Only the Gospel answers this question. Only faith enables us to understand and receive it.

## Faith

Unbelief refuses to believe the Gospel witness, that Christ is God and man, that He has accomplished salvation for His people. But God's word is the only evidence faith needs. Faith needs only God's word to know that Christ paid the uttermost farthing of my sin debt (Heb. 10:17-18). Faith needs only God's word to know that God is satisfied with Him and therefore with His people: "*He was delivered for our offences and was raised again for our justification*" (Rom. 4:25). Faith needs only God's word to know that Christ's obedience is my only righteousness before God: "*I will go in the strength of the Lord GOD: I will make mention of thy righteousness, even of thine only*" (Ps. 71:16; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21). Faith needs only God's word to know that Christ rules over sin and death and over all things in heaven and earth to save me to the uttermost "*Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the law, but under grace*" (Rom. 6:14; Heb. 7:25). Faith hungers and thirsts for God's word to know that Christ He has done all in my place (Heb. 11:1; Isa. 55:1-3; John 4:10).

What is faith? Faith is the persuasion of the truth concerning Christ and the salvation He accomplished for His people, which God revealed in the Gospel. This persuasion makes the Lord Jesus Christ all my trust.

When Abram was old and unable to have children, God said, "*I have made you a father of many nations*" (Rom. 4:17). When he had no children, God called him "Abraham:" father of many nations. Though it was not fulfilled, but based solely on God's word, Abraham was fully persuaded that what God promised, He was able also to perform (Rom. 4:21). That is faith. Faith is God-given persuasion, that

God is true, His word cannot fail, that what He said Christ has accomplished, is finished. *“Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised”* (Heb. 11:11). Do you see that this is God’s definition of faith?

- Sin begins with a failure to believe God and His word (Gen. 3:1-5). But faith seeks all things from God in Christ *“He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him”* (Heb. 11:6). Believers seek all things in Christ, even the faith they need to believe. Do you bring your faith to Christ, or do you come to Christ for faith?
- Unbelief looks upon itself through its own eyes and through the eyes of its enemies. Unbelief can only conceive of a salvation that includes some contribution from itself. But faith sees Christ as all and receives God’s testimony that He sees His people only in Christ *“In those days, and in that time, saith the LORD, the iniquity of Israel shall be sought for, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and they shall not be found: for I will pardon them whom I reserve”* (Jer. 50:20; Heb. 10:18). Faith sees what God sees: Christ and His people in Him.
- Unbelief measures God by itself. Faith measures God by God’s word concerning Christ.
- Unbelief thinks God will receive accept the obedience from men as righteousness. But faith looks away from itself to Christ’s obedience alone.
- Unbelief does not know God. But faith knows God in Christ. It knows Him by what He did: His kindness, His love, His justice. Christ loved me and gave Himself for me. God did not spare His own Son but made Him the propitiation for the sins of His people, the one offering that compensated and made satisfaction to God for their sins (1 John 4:9-10; Rom. 8:32).
- Unbelief can only believe God as far as human wisdom and strength are able to conceive and act. Unbelief therefore tries to secure God’s promises by what it does. Unbelief says, "Accept Jesus!" or, “Be circumcised!” But faith takes God’s word as true: Christ has perfected His people forever by His one offering. It is finished. And in Christ, faith rests (Heb. 4:3).

- Unbelief attempts to bring to God something from itself that God will accept. But faith is the gift of God's grace that persuades sinners that God has already made His people acceptable in His Son (Eph. 1:6).
- Unbelief secretly thinks God is evil. But faith sees only beauty in Christ.
- Unbelief is sad because it excludes me from glory. But faith sees that God is glad because His grace overcomes my unbelief by the resurrecting power of His Spirit of grace. He persuades me that Christ is enough, that He is all.

If God has said that Christ is enough and that He is satisfied with Him apart from any obedience on my part, then I can be satisfied with Him! By the resurrection of Christ, God has stamped His eternal "very good!" on His people, because He sees them in Christ (Eph. 1:4-6)! "*When He, had by Himself, purged our sins, He sat down on the right hand of the majesty on high*" (Heb. 1:3). Look to Christ. Believe Him. Look no further than Him. Look no more to yourself.

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{ The section below here was cut from the original sermon text for sake of time on the radio broadcast }

## Why some men believe Christ (Rom. 6:17)

As we consider these things together our natural reaction is to shore up our condition before God in our conscience. Our first reaction may be to think back to an experience or a decision we made, something that gives confidence and quiets our conscience against the awful prospect of facing God in all of His wrath in judgment! But before we do this, listen to this scripture. In Romans 11:32 God says that all men by nature do not believe! "God hath concluded them all in unbelief" (Rom. 11:32). To "conclude" means to "shut up." Unbelief is a prison of man's own making. It is our fault. All are not only guilty of it, but God has shut them up in their self-made prison. God alone can deliver from this prison. This begs the question, "Why do some men believe the Gospel?" The answer from scripture is abundantly clear. First, we learn in 2 Thess. 3:2 that faith is not natural to man. Faith is not something we are all born with. It is not something we need simply to exercise. No. Faith, saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, is a gift of God's grace.

Ephesians 2:8 puts it in the clearest light. “For by grace ye are saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). And lest we miss the point, He adds in verse 9, “Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:9).

Therefore, God has answered our question. Men are not born with faith. It is not part of our DNA. It is not inherited through genetics. Nor can we generate this faith we must have. Understand this. Unbelief is all our fault. But faith is all God’s gift. As one preacher put it, “Only your willful unbelief will keep you out of heaven. But only the will of God will keep you out of hell.” (DF). Scripture bears this out. Where does faith come from? Not from man. It comes from God. God’s grace alone motivates Him to bestow it, and it is a gift that is part of salvation.

The fact is, all men by nature are in a state of unbelief. When the Gospel is preached, some believe. Some do not. And the only explanation for the difference is that God grants repentance to those that believe. He gives them the gift of faith.

We may ask, if man does not determine who has faith, who does? The answer of course is God does. It is His gift. By grace you are saved. That means that God is moved to save a man, not for anything found in the man, whether good or bad, but only for what He finds in His own gracious will to show mercy. Remember Exodus 33:19? Moses asked God to show him His glory. God said, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious.” God alone saves. He does it by His own will. Man’s will has nothing (nothing) to do with his salvation!

Acts 13:48 explains why some believe this way, “As many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” Why do some believe? Because God ordained them to eternal life. Why does God give faith to them? Because He will be gracious; because of His will to do so, as it seems good in His sight.

Well then, if all men do not believe, and only some do, and only those whom God ordains to eternal life are given faith, and it does not depend on how good or bad they are, why should I worry? God will do what He wants no matter what I do! Such talk is the talk of unbelief. It takes one truth from God and denies the rest of

His revelation. Yes, God will be gracious to whom He will. But to act indifferently is to pretend to be more righteous than God! Such an attitude is an attempt to shift the blame of personal accountability for my unbelief to God's eternal will. If God commands all men to repent and believe the Gospel, yet repentance and faith come from God alone, and if "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above" (James 1:17-18), we must therefore take our place with the Publican in Luke 18:13, "God! Be merciful to me the sinner!" The answer to the evil inclination of our heart to accuse God of evil, and blame Him for our wickedness, is to bow to Him and come to Him looking to Christ. That's what the Publican did. He cried for propitious mercy, that is, for God to be gracious on the ground of the offering of Jesus Christ in satisfaction to God's justice.