

Why
John 12:36b-50
August 7, 2022

Read John 12:36b-50
This is the Word of the LORD.

Today's verses mark the end of Jesus' public ministry in the gospel of John. From here on out, Jesus would be with the disciples or under arrest and being taken through the system. John went from the anointing by Mary and the triumphant entry into Jerusalem to this summary of what was God's overarching plan and message.

John packed a lot of theology into these few verses. He got Old Testament prophesy, New Testament proclamation, predestination, judgment, and salvation into these verses. That's a lot. We are not going to exhaustively cover all those things, but we are going to go through them. As you buckle in, the point to take away is this: whoever sees Jesus sees God; and seeing (really seeing) Jesus matters.

Context

We start with the context. Chapter 12 began with the leadup to Passover in Jerusalem. Jesus traveled to Bethany, raised Lazarus from the dead, shared a celebratory meal with the family, and then rode triumphantly into Jerusalem the next day. The crowds from Bethany were joined by the crowds from Jerusalem, crying out for God's salvation and praising Jesus as God's anointed. The crowds were proclaiming him as king and recognizing him as God's anointed, the Messiah. It was an exciting time.

During the parade, some Greek men expressed a desire to see Jesus. When the request was reported to him, Jesus declared, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." In other words, the ultimate part of Jesus' earthly ministry was underway. Jesus explained in metaphorical terms what was going to happen, alluding to his crucifixion that would be much fruit. He followed that up with a call to follow because the time of judgment had arrived.

The time of judgment had arrived.

Take note: that's the context. The time of judgment had arrived. The "why" of Jesus' life, mission, death, and resurrection was to deal with judgment.

Isaiah

John then took a moment to further elaborate. "Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him." Later, John wrote, "Many, even the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees, they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God."

All of this, John explained, "was to fulfill the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah..."

Why was Isaiah important? First, the reference was important because it showed that God is sovereign, in control, and working out His will in real time. Jesus was not winging it. He was not improvising. He

was not adapting on the fly to changing circumstances. What was taking place was what God had foreseen, what God planned, how God planned it, and when God planned for it to happen.

Second, the reference to Isaiah was important to John because it revealed why people did not believe: they could not. Whether John understood their unbelief as a manifestation of God's election – or whether Isaiah had prophetically explained what John had observed (in other words, the predestination versus free will debate) – how they did not believe was not nearly as important as what was at stake: God's judgment.

Stay with me as I take you back to Isaiah's time. There, in 740 BC (pre-defeat and exile of both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom Judah), at a time when Israel felt secure and sure of God's protection – even though they were not living faithfully to God – the prophet Isaiah was given a vision of the throne room of heaven. It is a famous picture from the Old Testament that we heard in the call to worship this morning.

The smoke, the noise and the majesty were all so impressive that Isaiah was left gasping. The power, purity, and holiness were overwhelming. It would be difficult to take all of that vision in at once; it would be even more difficult to make sense out of it.

Isaiah had not been waiting for this vision, this transport into the realm of holiness. It happened to Isaiah. Isaiah was given this vision at a time of God's choosing. Israel had been taking God for granted – “ah, yes, God is holy and powerful, God will protect us; now, leave us alone to live our lives the way we want.” They thought God lived in the Temple and, well, as long as God was there, that was fine. Beyond living up to His responsibilities, God was not relevant.

Does that sound familiar? We sing with gusto, “God Bless America,” with the expectation that God has, God does, and God will bless America regardless of what we do. We think “we're Americans, and America is powerful and a light to the nations. Surely God will make sure everything all will be well in the end.” We say this while we persist on paths that we know are NOT pleasing in God's sight and yet ask God to protect and bless us.

I have mentioned this a couple of times, but we see it in American theology that has devolved into what is known as moralistic therapeutic deism. What many Americans believe Christianity teaches is this:

1. A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

In short, God has a limited relevance to **my** life here and now. That's what John meant when he wrote, “Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him.” Although God has shown us so many signs and called to us to faithfulness in so many ways, we still do not believe or trust him. God is not relevant.” We're good. God, you do you and leave me alone to live **my** life.”

I have spent time on this because the notion of “my life” is delusional. It ignores the reality that we are all accountable to God. We are all accountable to God. God does judge and God will judge. That’s what Isaiah realized. Isaiah was minding his own business. He was not waiting for this vision, but then – blam! – God made his presence known. Isaiah had a literal “come-to-Jesus” moment.

Even though the scene was overwhelming, Isaiah understood one important thing from his vision of the throne room of the LORD, the purest of the pure, the holiest of the holy, the most powerful of the most powerful: Isaiah saw how broken and sinful he was. “Woe is me!” he cried. “I am a man of unclean lips from a people of unclean lips!” Note here: Isaiah was aware of both his own sin and the sin of his community. They both matter. They both are connected. He was terrified because he realized he did not belong and would not – on his own – survive the inevitable judgment

Pay attention. Isaiah’s reaction was what any of us – and all of us – would have experienced. John Calvin’s *Institutes* begin with the observation that the knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves are interrelated. Calvin wrote:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he “lives and moves” [Acts 17:28]. For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God.

...Indeed, our very poverty better discloses the infinitude of benefits reposing in God. The miserable ruin, into which the rebellion of the first man cast us, especially compels us to look upward. ...**Each of us must be so stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness as to attain at least some knowledge of God.** Thus, from the feeling of our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, and –what is more – depravity and corruption, we recognize the true light of wisdom, sound virtue, full abundance of every good, and purity of righteousness rest in the Lord alone. To this extent we are prompted by our own ills to contemplate the good things of God; and ***we cannot seriously aspire to him before we become displeased with ourselves.*** ...Accordingly, the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.

For most of us, this is the way we experience God. We do not have the throne room vision. Instead, we find that our knowledge of God is limited because introspection – knowledge of ourselves – is painful. Because we try to avoid pain, we often miss the contemplation of who is God. And yet, by the power of the Holy Spirit, our consciences are tweaked. Our hearts are convicted bit by bit, so that “the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.”

Calvin continued:

Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy – this pride is innate in all of us – unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness,

foulness, folly, and impurity. Moreover, we are not thus convinced if we look merely to ourselves and not also to the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgment must be measured. (Calvin, *Institutes*, Book 1, Chapter 1, Sections 1-2).

So Isaiah was aware of the horror of sin in the presence of the holy. He cried out, “Woe is me!” A seraph took a live coal and touched his lips. The seraph said, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Isaiah did not say, nor does the Bible report elsewhere, but I imagine that this hurt quite a bit; like a refiner’s fire burning away the impurities.

It was at that point that the Lord asked, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” Isaiah stepped up and volunteered. “Here I am; send me!” This was where John picked up from Isaiah 6.

Look at what Isaiah was commissioned to say. It is what John quoted. The message Isaiah was to deliver was a message of judgment on the people of Israel for their unfaithfulness; that is, for their hard-hearted unwillingness to respond to God’s faithfulness.

Isaiah was sent to deliver a message of judgment. “Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.” Just as the people of Isaiah’s day matched that description; and the people of Jesus’ day matched that description; so do people of our day.

John was pointing out the same hard-heartedness. Jesus had done the signs. Jesus had taught the kingdom. Jesus had fulfilled the prophecies. Yet, the leaders did not recognize him because he upset the status quo. He was not acting according to their expectations. They were listening, but would not comprehend because they had pre-determined that he could not be who he revealed himself to be. They were looking, but would not see Jesus for who he was. Their hearts were hard. They did not want Jesus to be Jesus.

Friends, look around. John’s explanation for what happened then is just as applicable today. He recognized in Isaiah’s prophetic message the reason for why people do not believe: they cannot. Whether their unbelief is a manifestation of God’s election – or whether we, like John, are observing what Isaiah had prophetically explained – neither is nearly as important as what is at stake: God’s judgment. Whom do we fear more: man or God? Or, stated differently, whom are we more motivated to please: man or God? John pointed out that even those who thought Jesus was telling the truth, “fear[ed] that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God.”

Summary of Jesus’ Teaching

After explaining how Isaiah’s prophetic message had been fulfilled, John quoted Jesus’ final public declaration of the message he had come to deliver. The phrasing “cried out” is an accurate word-for-word translation, but the sense of the sentence is “Jesus proclaimed.”

The summary of Jesus teaching given here goes to the very heart of Jesus’ mission. Jesus was how God was restoring a broken relationship. Hear these things in the context of the relationship:

- “Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me.” This was familiar language to the people; there was a well-known Jewish maxim, “One sent is as he who sent

him.”¹ Jesus equated belief in him as belief in God who sent him. He was God’s agent, representative, and presence among the people to whom he had been sent. “Whoever sees me sees him who sent me.”

- “I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.” Darkness is bad. Darkness is brokenness. Darkness is empty and hopeless. Darkness is death. Jesus came so that people estranged from God through sin – “woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips from a people of unclean lips” – those estranged from God through sin would be redeemed and restored. They would not remain in darkness.
- “I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.” Jesus’ purpose, his mission, his life was given to save the world. Don’t get hung up on the “I do not judge” line because he returned to it: his coming was about God’s judgment, to be sure. Focus here on *how* Jesus saved the world.

How Jesus saved the world was a fulfillment of Isaiah 53 that was our Old Testament text. “Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole.” How Jesus saved us was by stepping in for us, accepting the consequence of judgment. If you want to know what God’s wrath on sin looks like, look at Jesus on the cross. Jesus endured the cross to save us unto life, not to leave us as we were.

- “The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge,” and there it is. To reject Jesus is to reject God who sent him, “for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak.” When we hear the words of Jesus, we are hearing the words of God. Those words matter; they matter a lot. They matter completely. They give us the standards by which our thoughts, actions, and choices will be ...judged. As Calvin wrote,

“it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy – this pride is innate in all of us – unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness, foulness, folly, and impurity. Moreover, we are not thus convinced if we look merely to ourselves and not also to the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgment must be measured.” Coming into the presence of unmitigated holiness, unblemished purity, unadulterated goodness without Jesus means that we have to stand on our own goodness – which that light reveals to be flawed and broken.”

It is remarkable then that Jesus said, “I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.” Paul referred to this in Romans 8, which we often quote in the Assurances of Pardon to our Prayers of Confession, “Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.”

- “I know that his commandment is eternal life.” The gift of Jesus is the gift of eternal life. The gift of eternal life has two parts: the eternal, unending part and the life part.

The eternal unending part is described at the end of Romans 8, “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor

¹ George R. Beasley-murray, Word Biblical Commentary, John, vol. 36, p. 217.

rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” In Christ we are more than conquerors. In Christ we are restored to a right relationship with God. In Christ the judgment on our sin is not pressed against us.

The life part of eternal life is dwelling in the richness of God’s love – living in right relationship with God. It is a restoration to how things were meant to be: a restoration to good. The only way to live in right relationship with God is to accept God, to believe in God, and to trust God. The only way to accept God, to believe in God, and to trust God is to believe Jesus, accept Jesus, and trust Jesus. There is life in Christ. The wages of sin, Paul wrote elsewhere, is death.

Communion

Jesus’ proclamation – the summary of his teaching – is that judgment is real. God does care about holiness, purity, and goodness. God does not tolerate rebellion, sin, or evil. They do not and cannot exist in God’s holy presence.

Jesus’ coming, his mission, and ministry was all about saving us from sin. It was God’s plan long before Jesus got to Jerusalem.

How Jesus was going to save us from sin was revealed prophetically in Isaiah 53. *That* he was going to save people for relationship was made tangible here – at this table. This meal he celebrated with his friends was a celebration of his being integrated with them and they with him. The meal we celebrate today is the same – he is integrated with us and us with him – as a witness and testimony to the world that whoever sees Jesus sees God; and seeing (really seeing) Jesus matters.

Amen.

Invitation to table

Communion

Questions:

1. When we talk about God’s judgment, what do you think? Does it frighten you? Does it encourage you? How would you explain to a non-believer the significance of God’s judgment?
2. How would you respond to someone espousing moralistic therapeutic deism? What would you affirm? What would you challenge? (And for both, why?)
3. To what kind of relationship is Jesus saving us? What does it look like? When does it start? How does it make a difference here and now?