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#69

“Who is this Son of Man?” John 12:34-41

Introduction

In Isaiah 55 we are taught that God's thoughts are not the same as our thoughts and His ways are not our ways. The prophet instructs us to understand that His ways and thoughts are higher than ours. We've learned this in various ways as a congregation over the years. I drove passed the old Christian Science building in West Lafayette a couple of weeks ago. That building is just down the street from our old church house on the corner of Stadium and Hayes. I used to walk around that building and pray that God would someday let us buy it for our church home. It seemed like a good plan to me – little did I know that that building would never have been big enough for the plans of God.

Then we looked for a suitable building for nearly ten years. I think there were something like 12 places we actively pursued purchasing. To every one of them, God said *no*. Not until this place opened up did we understand how superior His thoughts and His ways were to our own. When we moved over here there were a number of people who lamented the fact that we were leaving the city of West Lafayette. It was viewed as a serious strategic error. Not until the last year or so have we begun to understand that God's way would be for us to go back into West Lafayette with a second congregation. Surely His ways are better than our.

It is clear to see that often God works in ways that we can't predict or understand. That is the case

in the text before us today. The Jews had preconceived ideas about the Messiah – what He would be like and what He would do. But God’s ways were not like their ways. And so we will see today that in Christ – in the Son of Man – God did everything necessary to secure the salvation of His people – even if it was in a way that they had trouble believing.

[John 12:34-41]

This passage opens with the crowd expressing a fair bit of confusion. Jesus had just said (vs. 23) that *the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified*. And again, (vs. 34) that *the Son of Man must be lifted up*. We know that Jesus was speaking of His death (vs.33). But this is the very point that had the crowd confused – a confusion that we can rightly understand.

The title, Son of Man, to which Jesus most regularly applied to himself, was a title that was commonly understood to apply to the Messiah. It has its origin back in the book of Daniel 7. Daniel 7:13 &14 says *And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, And He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom, That all the peoples, nations and men of every language Might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion Which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one Which will not be destroyed.*

There were two things about this prophecy about the Messiah that the people craved. First it foretold of One who would have dominion over all of the nations and people of the world. For the Jews, nothing could have sounded sweeter than for Israel to return to a position of world dominance and to be

freed from the rule of the Romans. But they could not see any way for this to happen apart from the Messiah being an earthly, political king. This is what they expected and looked for. But God's ways were not their ways.

Secondly, the Daniel passage promised a Messiah with an everlasting kingdom which would not pass away or be destroyed. How, they now wondered, could Jesus say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Death seemed incompatible with an everlasting throne. It made no sense to them. But God's plans were higher than their plans. At least we can understand something of their confusion as they asked the question, *who is this Son of Man?*

In the passage we have read this morning we can see a couple of answers to their inquiry.

I. He is the light.

In verses 35 and 36 we read that Jesus *said to them, For a little while longer the Light is among you. Walk while you have the Light, so that darkness will not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light.* At first it seems like Jesus didn't answer their question. But then we should remember how prominent a theme this has been throughout Jesus' ministry and especially in this gospel. You know that John begins his gospel in chapter 1 with a fairly lengthy analogy of Jesus as the light coming into the darkness. But Jesus applies the metaphor to himself in chapters 3, 8, 9 and 11, where He more than once calls Himself the Light of the World. And now here, in answer to the puzzlement and confusion of the Jews he gives them an answer that is far more practical and shepherding than it is theological. If you were to ask

the question, *who is the Son of Man*, you would probably expect some doctrinal explanation.

In response to their unbelief and hard heartedness He patiently and graciously does three things.

1. He instructs them how to live.
2. He warns them of their danger.
3. He invites them to believe.

The instruction is simple. Walk while you have light to see. Jesus had spent his entire earthly ministry preaching and teaching the gospel. They had not been “kept in the dark” so to speak, as to what God required of them. Jesus was the light living among them and he’d shown them and told them how to live.

Likewise, He gives them a warning – if you reject the light you won’t know where you are going and the darkness will overtake you. In spite of the presence of His light, it was possible for them to shut their eyes and reject the light.

Finally, He invites them to become a son of Light. The beauty of Christ’s invitation is that we are too content to grope around in the darkness, feeling our way along, stumbling and tripping. But Christ invites us to believe and through believing we come to have the light of Christ in us.

Who is the Son of Man? He could have answered that a lot of ways. But Jesus wanted us to recognize Him as the light that shines in the darkness. Now would be a good time to evaluate your relationship to the Light.

But after saying these things and going away, John tells us the result of His teaching and in so doing reveals to us another aspect of this Son of Man.

II. He is the Lord of Salvation.

At this point our text this morning gets very, very interesting. And potentially, very confusing. What happens at this point is that the apostle John gives us some explanation of the Son of Man. He tells us a little bit about the dynamics of what is going on. The text tells us that in spite of everything Jesus has said and done people were not believing in Him.

On the surface it would seem that the implication is Jesus' ministry is failing. What good is a preacher if no one believes? What good is a teacher if no one learns? What good is a Savior if no one repents? What good is a Lord if no one follows?

What John does is quote from two places in Isaiah to demonstrate that everything that was happening was a fulfillment of God's great plan and prophecy. Jesus' mission was not universal acceptance but the redemption of the elect. So as we read John's commentary we notice a couple of very important facts. First, we find that the people refused to believe. But secondly, and maybe surprisingly, we learn that the people were unable to believe.

1. The people refused to believe.

Verse 37 tells us that *though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him*. On one level we marvel at this. How could you witness the incredible miracles done by Jesus and not be moved to faith? And yet as we have seen throughout the gospel, this was exactly the case over and over again. And so we conclude rightly that there is a difference between being the witness to a miracle and being the recipient of one.

I wonder if you consider yourself to be the recipient of a powerful work of Christ? When we read the story of a blind man crying out loudly for the mercy of Christ and then we read of how Jesus came to him and healed him, we are rightly moved

by that. But do you think of yourself in the same category? In truth, if you are a Christian you are so because of the powerful work of God upon your life. He has touched you just as certainly as he touched anyone whom He healed.

But these people, John says, were like those in Isaiah's day. In spite of all that God had done for Israel, the people in his day would not believe. Verse 38 is a quote from the first verse of Isaiah 53. Isaiah 53, you might remember, is that wonderfully detailed prophecy of the coming suffering of Christ. The parallels between the two are very close. In both places people refused to believe. In both places that clear answer is the coming death of Christ. That is the only place that unbelief can be met and defeated.

If you were totally honest with yourself, would you say that you are a person who has refused to believe? If so, would you at least acknowledge that testifying against your position are the teaching of Christ, the miracles of Christ and ultimately the resurrection of Christ? Are you really sure about your position? At stake is eternity. At stake is your soul.

2. The people were unable to believe. (Read verses 39-41) These are hard words to understand. We know that God is not the author of sin. We know that He tempts no one and causes no one to sin. He is not a worker of evil. We know that He is merciful and just. So what does it mean that *He blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts?* Isaiah said these things in Isaiah 6 right after he'd seen the glory of God in that magnificent passage on the holiness of God – and right after his own sins had been forgiven. Admittedly there is mystery here – there are things here that belong to the secret

counsels of God. But there are also things we can understand and that God has told us that helps us.

1. It is because of unbelief that He blinds the eyes of some.

As we've already seen, this explanation fits the context. Up in verse 35 Jesus said that if you don't walk in the light the darkness will overtake you. The Bible confirms that if a man walks in darkness, if he indulges in sin, things will get darker. Study the second half of Romans 1 and you'll see the downward spiral of wickedness that comes to someone who rejects Christ. I John 2:11 gets at the same things: *But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.* If you are playing around with sin, you are putting yourself in a very precarious position. How do you know that your sin will not lead you into a progressively darker path? Today is the day you need to repent.

2. It is because of the election of God that He blinds the eyes of some.

As much as men tend to argue against this, the Bible is clear. Romans 9:14-18 spells it out. *"What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth." So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.*

3. It is because of His redemptive plan that He blinds the eyes of some.

When you think about what was happening with the Jews in terms of God's plan we can understand that the hardening of the Jews became the means by which Jesus was rejected and crucified. Had they embraced Him they never would have crucified Him. In addition, this hardening was the means by which the gospel was taken to the nations of the world. As the Jews were cut off, the Gentiles were grafted in.

Now, there is one other item that we should consider concerning this blinding and hardening. How does God do it? The simplest answer is that He merely withholds His grace. We already know that we are born blind. We are born with hardened hearts that are at enmity with God. For conversion to take place we must receive that powerful working of God's regenerating grace. If God does not grant that to us, it is proper to say that He blinds our eyes and hardens our hearts. We say it because we acknowledge that He is absolutely sovereign in the matters of salvation. He uses other agents to accomplish this – *Satan has blinded the eyes of the unbelieving . . .*

So as we conclude, we must end with our own confession. Who is the Son of Man? Do you confess that He is the light of the world? Do you hold fast to a commitment to walk in His light. That's what it means to follow Jesus. And do you acknowledge that He is your Lord? Do you know that you are saved only because He has not blinded your eyes, but instead opened them to see Him? And do you know that He has not hardened your heart, but instead softened it so that you might love Him? If so then walk in the light and worship Him with your whole heart.