

Unbelief

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[0 : 00] Do you believe in Jesus? Different people will respond to that question in different ways. Some may fervently cry out, I believe.

While for others, their reply may be an honest, I don't believe. Still others will be uncertain as to what the question means or implies.

Who is this Jesus that I am to believe in? Or what does it mean to believe in Jesus? These would be legitimate questions that some might have to clarify the question in order to be able to answer it. The Philippian jailer of whom we read in the book of Acts posed a strikingly incisive question to Paul and Silas. who were prisoners in his jail.

Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And he received an equally incisive response. Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.

[1 : 16] So, believing in Jesus is important. We can go further and say, certainly suggest you can come to your own conclusions on the matter, but we can go further and say that there is nothing more important than believing in Jesus.

Not surprisingly, the Bible devotes a great deal of attention to this matter of belief, but it also broaches the solemn matter of unbelief.

It does so in significant measure, and especially in the Gospels, by means of real-life examples of those who believe and of those who fail to believe.

Last week, we began to consider the occasion when Jesus healed the man born blind, recorded for us in John's Gospel in chapter 9 that we've read.

And I want to revisit this miracle from this perspective of belief and of unbelief. You see, the miracle, as we've read, is met by two contrasting responses, a response of belief and a response of unbelief.

[2 : 31] The blind man, or the formerly blind man, believes, and the Pharisees disbelieve. The formerly blind man worships Jesus, and the Pharisees reject Jesus.

To do some justice, not full justice, I'm sure, but to do some justice to the material that we have in this chapter, what we're going to do is spend this morning considering the unbelief of the Pharisees, and next Sunday morning, the belief of the formerly blind man.

I really wish he had a name. It would be so much easier just to give him a name rather than speak of the formerly blind man. But anyway, so this morning, the unbelief of the Pharisees.

One point to make before we further proceed. The unbelief of the Pharisees on this occasion is what we could call a case study in unbelief.

What I mean by this is that it serves as an example or manifestation of the unbelief of one particular group of people at a particular moment in time.

[3 : 43] As such, though there are lessons to be learned and light to be shed on the subject of unbelief, we ought not to imagine that unbelief always looks the same.

There will be features to the unbelief of the Pharisees that will not necessarily be evident or even present in the unbelief of other unbelievers.

Equally, there will be aspects of unbelief in the Pharisees that are more prominent or intense than will be the case with other unbelievers that you may know and interact with today.

So with that clarification, I suppose, we're ready to go. The question really is this. Why don't the Pharisees believe? Why don't they believe in Jesus?

At face value, there would seem to be ample and certainly sufficient reasons for believing. The evidence is seemingly overwhelming.

[4 : 45] Jesus has healed a man born blind. A miracle of which it is said by the man himself, nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind.

The healing of the blind man was both unprecedented and was also of eloquent and powerful prophetic significance. As we noticed last Sunday evening, the granting of sight was identified by the prophets as a messianic prerogative and sign.

So in and of itself, it was something clearly unprecedented and powerful, but also it served as a sign pointing to the identity of the one who was able to do such a thing.

So the evidence laid before all who were willing to consider it was considerable. You might say overwhelming. You might imagine that a careful and objective evaluation of the evidence would lead any reasonable observer to but one conclusion.

Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is the promised Messiah. At the very least, a reasonable observer would remain open to the possibility that Jesus was the Messiah.

[6 : 09] But what do we find with the Pharisees? The Pharisees disbelieve. They're not willing to even consider as a remote possibility that this man might be the Messiah.

They are guilty of unbelief. But why? Why don't they believe? At one level, the answer is simple enough.

They are blind. They're not physically blind, but they are spiritually blind. They are incapable of seeing and certainly understanding what is before their very eyes because of their spiritual blindness.

This is a core truth that the miracle as a sign reveals. It serves to highlight this fundamental spiritual reality that all men are spiritually born blind.

It is true of us, and it was true of the Pharisees. Returning to Nicodemus, we read just one verse in John chapter 3 this morning, but returning to Nicodemus, we remind ourselves of what Jesus said to Nicodemus.

[7 : 25] I tell you the truth. No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. Nobody can see. Nobody can understand. Nobody can perceive these spiritual matters unless they are born again.

The Pharisees have not been born again, and so they cannot see the kingdom of God. In particular, they cannot recognize the king of God's kingdom. They cannot see King Jesus for who he is, even in the face of the overwhelming evidence pointing to Jesus as the Messiah King.

So why don't the Pharisees believe? They are blind. They cannot believe. That might appear to be the end of the matter and the end of the discussion concerning unbelief.

What more can we say? They are blind. Therefore, they cannot see. End of story. However, that, though true, is not the end of the story.

What this incident vividly and richly illustrates is that the blindness of unbelief is buttressed and sustained and hardened by what we could call means.

[8 : 39] To put it another way, we can say that the Pharisees are blind, yes, but that they are blinded by dot, dot, dot, dot, dot, and identify those means that serve to blind them.

So let's do that and ask this next question. What are the Pharisees blinded by? What are they blinded by?

I want to suggest five things that we find in this passage that blind the Pharisees. They're blinded by prejudice. They're blinded by pride.

They're blinded by stubbornness. They're blinded by hostility. And they're blinded by fear. And as we'll see, many of these interconnect and overlap one with the other.

Before we do think of these five means whereby these men are blinded, I just want to respond to a question that I hope presents itself in your own mind.

[9 : 43] What practical purpose is served by this examination of unbelief? Would we be not much better served thinking about belief? Well, we're going to do that next week.

But what can we gain by examining these men's unbelief? Well, if you are an unbeliever, I trust and pray that this will help you examine and consider your own unbelief and indeed, by God's grace, shake you out of your unbelief.

But if you are a believer this morning, I hope this will help you better understand those you are called to testify to. And so testify more intelligently.

So what are the fantasies blinded by? Prejudice, pride, stubbornness, hostility, and fear. We'll begin with prejudice. I use this word prejudice with a focus on its literal meaning of prejudging.

Prejudging. Prejudging. Prejudging. A prejudice is a preconceived opinion, not based on reason and usually negative, which we bring to the table before even beginning the debate.

[10 : 59] It is a particular kind of presupposition. The difference is that a presupposition could be, though not always is, based on reason. The Pharisees were blinded by their prejudice.

Now, the most glaring example in the passage, and there are more than one, but time constrains me to just give one example. The most glaring example.

The most glaring example in the passage is to be found in verse 22. Let's just notice what, remind ourselves what that verse says. It's in the context of the parents being unwilling to recognize that Jesus had been involved in the healing of their son for fear of the consequences.

And then we read, his parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue.

You see the problem? They had already decided. They had already decided. It didn't matter one whit what Jesus did or said.

[12 : 12] It was of no consequence what evidence pointed in the direction of Jesus as the Messiah. It was immaterial what the blind man said. Powerful and convincing though his testimony was, for they had already decided.

They had already decided. Now the Pharisees and their worldview may seem very far removed from the worldview of your regular unbeliever today.

But in this matter, there are striking similarities. How many folk today have already decided?

Already decided that God doesn't exist or that the Christian faith is irrelevant or that the Bible is full of myths or that they don't need a Savior or that Christians are bigots.

And we could go on and on and on. They have already decided. They are blinded by prejudice.

Might that be true of somebody here this morning?

You've already decided. You've maybe already decided that the Christian message is not for you.

You've already decided that you could never be a Christian. You've already decided.

[13 : 26] And so whatever is said, whatever arguments are placed before you, they are unlikely to have a great deal of impact for you, for you have already decided.

As believers, as we interact and seek to persuade others, it is important for us to try and identify what folks have already decided and challenge them, winsomely and courteously, but challenge them on their presuppositions and prejudices.

It's also true that we should be humble enough to recognize that we can be guilty of coming to the table with our own prejudices and honest enough to recognize that we come to the discussion with our own presuppositions.

That's inevitable. It could be no other way. So the Pharisees were blinded by prejudice. But let's move on to the second means that serves to blind the Pharisees, blinded by pride.

Pride is singularly effective in blinding the unbeliever. It's difficult to know where to start in the case of the Pharisees as their pride rears its ugly and blinding head on numerous occasions.

[14 : 40] We can focus on their attitude to the blind man himself, and in contrast, their attitude to themselves. In this matter, verse 34 is revealing.

It's really the end of their interrogation of the blind man. And there we read in verse 34, To this they replied, You were steeped in sin at birth. How dare you lecture us?

In their conversation or interrogation of the blind man up to this point, They have hardly been friendly, but their pronounced superiority complex is witnessed in all its glory here in this verse.

They will not listen to this man regardless of what he says because of who he is. He is beneath them. He's beneath them.

It doesn't matter what he says. They are so above him that they don't even need to listen. They know already that whatever he says is of no value because of who he is.

[15 : 46] They are so proud that they think he has nothing to tell them. Now, there is a delicious irony in their proud and arrogant dismissal of the blind man that we can't buy, or we can't pass by without comment.

The Pharisees are in no doubt that his blindness was caused by and was a punishment for sin. The language they use is eloquent. Steeped in sin at birth.

Steeped in sin at birth. That's why you're blind. And consequently, because of that, he could have nothing to say to them. The logic, warped logic, but the warped logic is clear enough.

Blind at birth, therefore steeped in sin, therefore nothing to say. We can follow their thinking. But, and this is the huge but, he's no longer blind.

And so, on their own logic, the reasonable conclusion would have to be miraculously healed, therefore steeped in the favor of God, therefore everything to say to them.

[16:53] But, alas, no. Reasonable though that would have been, alas, no. Why? Why don't they take that reasonable step on the basis of their own logic? Because they're blinded by pride.

They're blinded by pride. Blinded by prejudice, but blinded also by pride. But their pride is also evidenced in their attitude to themselves.

Notice how they describe themselves a little earlier on in their discussion or interrogation of the formerly blind man.

Then in verse 28, Then they hurled insults at him and said, You are this fellow's disciple. We are disciples of Moses. The tone is clear.

They wear their identity as disciples of Moses as a badge of distinction and merit. Nobody can teach them anything about God because they are disciples of Moses, the one to whom God spoke.

[18:01] And they are proud of their status as disciples of Moses. Proud in their attitude to the blind man, pride in their own vision of themselves.

And pride blinds the unbeliever. And pride can take many and diverse forms. It is not always or indeed ordinarily as strident and virulent as with the Pharisees on this occasion.

There is the pride of those who consider themselves intellectually above belief in God or flying spaghetti monsters. If any of you are familiar with the debate that goes on in the introduction of this particular deity.

You know, those who are above that, they say, well, obviously we don't believe in that kind of nonsense, those kind of myths. We don't even need to think about such ludicrous suggestions.

It's pride. Intellectual pride. The pride of those who reckon that they can make their own way to heaven by the route that they choose.

[19:07] The pride of those who consider themselves good and decent folk that have no pressing need for forgiveness. The pride of those who imagine that in the end God is under the obligation to do the right thing and welcome them.

There is also or can be pride dressed up as false humility. The pride of those who refuse to believe and lay hold of the promises of God and imagine that God could never forgive them.

That sounds very humble, but really it's pride dressed up as false humility. I know better than God. God says He'll forgive me, but I know that He can't. I know that He wouldn't.

I know that He won't. We have to be very careful with pride. All of us have to be careful with pride. But one of the pernicious results of pride is that it blinds.

So, blinded by prejudice, blinded by pride, but also blinded by hostility. The Pharisees were blinded by hostility. It's not simply that they disagree with Jesus or are indifferent to Jesus or robustly a challenge.

[20:16] The claims of Jesus. They hate Jesus. Throughout the whole episode, there is a simmering antipathy and hostility towards Jesus.

In verse 24, this is eloquently expressed. As they challenged the blind man or the formerly blind man, give glory to God, they said, We know this man is a sinner.

This wasn't just some neutral theological statement. This was declared with real fervor. We know this man is a sinner. He's a sinner. He's the lowest of the low.

He's a Sabbath breaker. He's a sinner. It just is so loaded with hostility and with hatred for the person of Jesus.

Notice how they are unwilling to even pronounce His name. They speak of this man or this fellow. The very name of Jesus sticks in their throat.

[21:21] It strikes me the contrast. How different to the experience of a believer. How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear.

But not for these men. Not for these men. The name of Jesus rankled with them because they were hostile to the man called Jesus.

And of course, their hatred of Jesus spills over into a hatred of His disciples and especially of the man formerly blind. We read there in verse 28. And they hurled insults at Him.

They hurled insults at Him and said, You are this fellow's disciple. It's very evident that in this case, and I did stress, this is a case study of one particular group of unbelievers at one particular moment in time.

But it's very evident that in this occasion, hatred blinds the Pharisees. Is hatred always a feature of unbelief?

[22 : 29] I don't think so. There are many unbelievers who don't hate Jesus. They are indifferent to Jesus. They are unwilling to bow down before Him, but don't certainly in any conscious way hate Him.

But many do hate Jesus. I find it intriguing, even comical, how the more strident atheists are able to hate with a passion a God they don't believe in.

It really is quite striking. With what passion? They hate this God who does not exist. And I think it is observably the case that in Britain, we are increasingly witnessing an attitude to biblical Christianity that is ever more palpably fueled, at least in part, by hostility.

It's not a case of falling into some persecution complex or seeing demons around every corner. But it seems to me, observably so, that hostility to biblical Christianity is very much a feature and on the rise and explains much of the opposition to the Christian faith.

So, the Pharisees are blinded also by hostility, but blinded also by stubbornness. Now, stubbornness is very connected to prejudice and pride.

[23 : 47] Stubbornness is really the offspring of the unholy union of prejudice and pride. And the Pharisees certainly were blinded by stubborn pig-headedness.

Now, this is clearly seen in their persistent and repeated questioning of the formerly blind man. Time and again, they stubbornly asked the same questions in the hope, the forlorn hope, that the man might change his story to fit their prejudices.

Now, the manner in which the man responds to their stubbornness is very entertaining.

This man has got to be one of my favorite characters in the Bible. Notice how he responds to this stubborn questioning on and on with the same questions. There in verse 27, he answered, I have told you already, and you did not listen.

Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too? The words are just dripping with irony. Do you want to become his disciples too?

[25 : 02] Well, he knows that that's the last thing they want to do. But with what skill and with what capacity he is able to challenge them? With what irony?

He sees how stubborn they are, how blinded by their stubbornness, and he really mocks them. And with good reason. Because these men were blinded by their stubbornness.

And in this we also have to be careful, perhaps you have to be careful on this count. One of the problems with stubbornness, and this of course is true with stubbornness in whatever way it manifests itself.

And as Christians we can be very guilty of being stubborn. But one of the problems with stubbornness is that we generally are, not surprisingly, stubbornly reluctant to accept that we are behaving stubbornly.

That's the problem with being stubborn. So I say be careful, lest you be blinded by stubbornness.

And also, as believers, we must be aware that as we share the good news, there will be those who simply stubbornly refuse to believe.

[26 : 13] And it reminds me a little bit of this whole Lance Armstrong episode. You know, you hear some of his supporters being interviewed, be it his lawyer or supporters of Lance Armstrong.

And you know, and they're presented with all the evidence. And they say, no, he's innocent. He's innocent. It doesn't matter what the evidence is. It doesn't matter the weight of the evidence.

They've decided, and stubbornly they will refuse to concede his guilt. Well, that's often the case with how people respond to the gospel. They stubbornly refuse to believe.

Blinded by stubbornness. But one final means that serves to fuel, to buttress, to support the blindness of the Pharisees. They're blinded also by fear.

Now, fear is not so obviously present in this incident. But let me suggest two ways in which the Pharisees are blinded by fear. First of all, in the context of the division of opinion that is recorded in verse 16 within the Pharisees, where one group concludes that Jesus could not be a sinner.

[27 : 21] There in verse 16, it's interesting. This whole discussion or this division of opinion is full of interest, but we can't do anything other than simply focus on it for this purpose of identifying fear.

Some of the Pharisees said, this man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath. But others asked, other Pharisees asked, how can a sinner do such miraculous signs?

So they were divided. So here we have these Pharisees, and there's a division of opinion as to what is going on and what conclusions should be reached concerning Jesus. So that's clear.

There is a division of opinion. But then what do we read in verse 24 as the incident progresses? In verse 24, we read, a second time they summoned the man who had been blind.

The Pharisees summoned the man who had been born blind. Give glory to God, they said. The they referring corporately to the Pharisees.

[28 : 20] Give glory to God, they said. We know this man is a sinner. Now, my question is this. Where are those who proffered a different opinion? You see, earlier on, there were Pharisees who were saying, well, no, he can't be a sinner because look at the miracle that he's done.

Now, you could actually analyze whether that logic is valid or not, but that's not the point. The point is that earlier on, there were Pharisees who had come to a different conclusion. So where are they now?

Were they bullied into submission or more likely silenced by fear? Theirs was, it would seem, a minority opinion, and they consider it prudent to go with the flow.

Yes, at one point they were willing to express their opinion that this man couldn't be a sinner, but as they get a feel for the way things are going, they say, no, I think it's probably best just to keep quiet on this one.

We'll just go with the flow. We'll just join in with those who have decided he's a sinner, even though we're not actually sure if he is. Why do they do that?

[29 : 27] Because they're afraid. They're afraid to be different. They're afraid to be that minority opinion. And how contemporary is that? How contemporary is that?

How many people, how many of our politicians who disagree with a policy on moral grounds, yet they keep very quiet? Why? Because they don't want to be that minority opinion.

So they go with the flow. How many in academia go with the flow? How many of us in our own circles and among our own peers go with the flow? Because we're afraid. We're afraid of being that minority opinion.

We're blinded by fear. Well, that for the timid Pharisees. But what of the aggressive Pharisees whose opinion predominates?

Well, they are also blinded by fear. They are afraid of their opinion being challenged. They are afraid of the truth. They are afraid of a loss of status and privilege and comfort if this man called Jesus might just be the Messiah.

[30 : 34] And many today are blinded by fear. Afraid to believe. Afraid of what comes next. Afraid of failing as a Christian. Afraid of the unknown.

Afraid of publicly identifying with Jesus Christ. Afraid of Christ. Why don't the Pharisees believe? Yes, we can rightly say because they are blind.

They are spiritually blind. But blinded by what? Blinded by prejudice. Blinded by pride. Blinded by hostility and stubbornness and fear.

There remains one final matter for us to consider. And we will do so very fleetingly. Unduly fleetingly. But this final question we can't leave unasked and in a measure unanswered.

Is their unbelief culpable? The unbelief of the Pharisees. Is it culpable? You see, at one level it would seem unfair to attribute moral culpability for their unbelief.

[31 : 39] How can they believe if they are blind? And yet Jesus is clearly of the opinion that they are culpable. You see, at the close of the chapter, Jesus, in a curious twist that he plays with the picture of blindness, he recognizes that the Pharisees are, in one sense, not blind.

Notice there in verse 41, and we have to limit ourselves just to that one verse and not all that had gone before in the previous verses. Jesus said, he's speaking to the Pharisees, he says, If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin.

But now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. So, what is Jesus saying? Well, what Jesus is doing is recognizing that the knowledge that they claim to have and in actuality do have concerning the Scriptures and the Messiah makes them without excuse and morally culpable for their unbelief.

And listen to the profoundly solemn words with which Jesus ends this dialogue with the Pharisees. Your guilt remains.

Your guilt remains. Your guilt remains. You see, at the final day, on that great day of judgment, nobody will be able to say, Wasn't my fault I didn't believe.

[33 : 08] Wasn't my fault. It was the fault of election. It was the fault of predestination. It was God's fault. No, you see, that just won't do.

Jesus solemnly and eloquently and profoundly addresses these men and says, Your guilt remains. Your guilt remains.

What these words teach us is that in the estimation of God, unbelief is sinful. Unbelief is not simply a philosophical posture that we take.

Unbelief is, in fact, the most grievous of sins from which all others flow. And what must we do with sin? What is sin's only remedy?

Unbelief is, in fact, repentance and faith. Repentance and faith. Repentance and faith. Believe in the Lord Jesus. Put your trust in Jesus, the Savior of sinners, the one who died on Calvary's tree for sinners.

[34 : 10] Put your trust in Him. Believe in Him. And you will be saved. And you will be brought from the darkness of unbelief into the bright light of belief.

In the eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. You will be saved and be forgiven of your unbelief. Let us pray.

Let us pray.