

The Controlling Glory  
John 12:41-43

As we look at our text, we are reminded again and again that salvation is of the Lord. And as we think of last week's text, we are reminded that if we refuse the grace of God, God has every right to withhold grace. He has every right to harden our hearts in the direction that we are already going in. And we also realize that when people choose to reject Jesus they have no one else to blame other than themselves. This text certainly does not teach that there are certain people that want to come but God is holding them back. They do not want to come. They have rejected Jesus himself, and have even become hostile to him. No one can blame God for their lost condition and the judgment that will follow. This is a very sobering and grim passage, and a reminder to not refuse the grace of God that is offered today. Today is the day to believe and trust in Jesus.

But the text we will look at tonight is a reminder that there is always light in the midst of darkness. God is always at work in the heart and lives of men, and his grace comes in places and to individuals that we would never expect. And we see that in our text. But the text is also very difficult to interpret, because were the people in the text really converted? We realize the promise of Christ is eternal life to any and all who believe. But at the same time we realize that evidence of that belief is an identification with Jesus Christ. In fact, in Luke 12:8-9, "**And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.**" Jesus says quite clearly, if you deny him before others, he will deny you before the angels of God, or at the last judgment.

And it really brings up the question: can you be a secret follower of Jesus? Is it possible to believe on Jesus, commit your heart to him, but remain in a secretive state? Is it possible to have your sins forgiven in Christ but no one know that you follow him? You might even live a moral and upright life but no one knows who the master of your life is. The text seems to suggest that it is possible, but like I said there are other texts that seem to contradict that very notion. Bring in the problem that we who confess Jesus openly many times do struggle with confessing him openly. There are times where we should be vocal when we are silent as far as our witness of Christ. And this passage is very fascinating and instructive and challenging. The commentaries that are written about this gospel are pretty well split on whether these happen to be true believers or people who came close but did not come all the way.

And it is a struggle to really answer the question as to their eternal state. But it does bring up the question of our own standing before Jesus, because I would not want to stand on shaky ground whether I know of I truly trusted in Christ or not. We realize that we are saved by grace alone through simple belief in Christ. But that faith is never alone. Faith in Christ not only changes our status before God, but also changes our lives - our very nature - our heart. And we realize that when we trust in Christ we are justified forevermore, but we are being sanctified. If there is no sanctification, if there is no change then there is no salvation. So we will examine this little paragraph a in more depth and see what it says and see if we can draw some conclusions from it.

1. We need to see their faith and struggle. V. 42.

One of the things that we realize about authentic faith in Jesus is that so often, and more times than not, our lives can actually become more difficult when we come to Christ. Certainly we have the comfort and peace of Christ, but we also have the opposition of the world. And that might bring the loss of friends, loss of status, taunting from others, and ostracism from those we once loved. Many times families are torn apart. And here is what all of us know who are truly born again: there is a cost of believing and trusting Jesus in salvation. Jesus says in the Beatitudes that this is one of the signs that you are his, **“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matt. 5:11-12).”** And Paul says in 2Timothy 3:12, **“All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecution.”** Opposition to our faith is one of the obvious costs of following Jesus, and it is public.

And those who just heard the teaching of Jesus and witnessed the raising of Lazarus realized the truth of Jesus but also realized the cost. Look at the verse again, **“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.”** Now even though John explains the rejection of Jesus through this hardening of Israel that was judicial in nature, we see that grace shines through the darkness. Even though we have this rejection and hatred of Jesus, we read, “Nevertheless,” indicating something else took place, and that is, many even of the authorities believed in him. Many of the common people along with the religious leaders believed in Jesus. And when you look at this word “believe,” this is the same word that has been used for the call of salvation all the way through the Gospel of John. Just like John 3:16, **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”** There is the promise. It is simple belief or trust in Christ as Lord and Saviour.

And this text is encouraging in this sense: even in the darkest hours the gospel message is doing more than we ever can see or comprehend. We think often that nothing is happening, but there is more happening than we realize. And that should encourage us in our labours especially when we are not seeing any tangible results. He is working in our families and church. God is doing a work, and many times he is doing that work in people and places that we would never assume or think that he is doing.

Now when we look at that statement, it seems that many may have come to Christ, but here is the problem: they realized that to confess Jesus openly would mean severe consequences in their lives. Listen to verse, **“but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue.”** Here is the problem, their whole lives would change. They would be excommunicated not just from temple worship but from the community. People would disassociate themselves from them. You would be looked upon as a traitor to God and the nation. And for the religious leaders it would be a loss of status and position. It would be hard even to find work. And they recognized that cost. And we can almost sympathize with them. We often feel that pull or tug to keep our faith concealed from those around us, and the heavy guilt that comes along with it. Many think that these were new converts that

were just weak in the faith. They kept their faith hidden but as they grew they would openly declare Jesus. They had a personal trust in Jesus, and although hidden it would not stay hidden for that long. James Boice quotes Matthew Henry in his commentary as saying, **“The truth of the gospel has perhaps a better interest in the consciences of men than we are aware of. Many cannot but approve of that in their hearts which yet outwardly they are shy of. Perhaps these chief rulers were true believers, though very weak, and their faith like smoking flax.... Some are really better than they seem to be. Their faults are known, but their repentance is not; a man’s goodness may be concealed by a culpable yet pardonable weakness, which he himself truly repents of. The kingdom of God comes not in all with a like observation; nor have all who are good the same faculty of appearing to be so.”** Is this what we have here?

But here is the thing that we have to realize - God’s grace is never cheap grace. It is costly grace that overcomes all the obstacles that are needed to come to him. Grace works faith in our hearts to see that Jesus is the Lord. He is not a weak Saviour but Lord over life and over everything. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 16:24-25, **“Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.’** It is amazing that cross bearing is just about any little difficulty that we have in life. But here cross bearing is related to Jesus. It is the difficulties and persecution that come with knowing Jesus. The call to believe is synonymous with a call to follow. Listen to how clearly Paul states this truth in Romans 10:9, **“because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”** And remember that Jesus has just talked about that cost because he has talked about his own death. This salvation is costly, and his grace is costly.

So let me ask you: are you trying to be a secret follower of Jesus Christ? Because it really is an impossibility. Those who trust, believe and love the Lord cannot help but be public testimonies. That is why we even have baptism today. Baptism is a public declaration of where my hope and trust lies. Those who are unwilling, you have to wonder about their allegiances and whether they are truly born again believers in Christ. If you are a secret believer, let me say at the very best that you are really on shaky ground. There is no assurance for those who are living in sin and will not do anything about it. As James says, “faith without works is dead.” Has your belief in Jesus caused you to confess Christ openly and revel in who he is?

2. We need to see the real struggle. V. 43.

I think we all know this, but all who profess Christ do not know Christ. There are many who come up short of truly believing in him. Many will believe about him but truly have not trusted him as Lord and Saviour. And I do believe that this group is in that category. These individuals are those who came close but did not trust Christ. And the reason why I say that is because of this verse right here. It is what they truly loved. Remember, the blind man in John 9 who had far less knowledge of the Scriptures was thrown out of the synagogue for his profession of Jesus. He realized the truth - he realize that Jesus is the only hope. He is the Messiah. And that is what open eyes to

the truth of Christ do - they confess him. It does not mean that we never struggle with professing him openly but that is so different from an attitude that is content just to keep the truth about Jesus to yourself. He really is not part and parcel of your life and daily living. The real struggle is about what we truly believe and what we hold dearest and nearest in our hearts.

And notice what this verse says, **“for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”** Notice that there is a love of something that is greater than God and greater than the Messiah. It was not that I would rather have Jesus than anything. But what did they love? The glory that comes from man. And this is talking mainly about the religious authorities. They loved the greeting in the streets and the chief seats at special dinners and banquets. They loved the position and stature they had in that society rather than the glory that comes from God, or may I say the glory of God. Yes, these promises in the gospel are great and I believe them and believe Jesus is who he says he is, but what I want from the world trumps what Jesus can give me. It is incredible how blind man is to the significance and grandeur of the promises and the glory of God. Listen what Arthur Pink writes here, **“These men, whose minds were convinced but whose hearts remained unmoved, not only feared the religious authorities, but they also desired the approbation of their fellows. They were determined to retain their good opinion, even though at the expense of an uneasy conscience. They preferred the good will of other sinners above the approval of God. O the shortsighted folly of these wretched men! O the madness of their miserable choice! Of what avail would the good opinion of the Pharisees be when the hour of death overtook them? In what stead will it stand them when they appear before the judgment-throne of God?”**

Incredible what the natural person, even when they are convinced about Jesus, what they will choose instead of Him. In our sin we are so myopic in our vision of the glory of God in his promises. Individuals pin all our hopes on the here and now which no one can keep. Jesus asks these questions in Matthew 16:26, **“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”** What are you after in this life? What is more important than Jesus Christ? For them it was earthly glory and prestige. For others it is money or friends or advancement in career or whatever. But there is some other glory that they are chasing after.

And this is really in contrast to verse 41. Look back to what John records right after the quote, **“Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.”** Isaiah wrote these words that were given to him by God right after he saw his glory. We mentioned that last time. It is an awesome chapter. Let me just read the first four verses of that chapter and try and enter into the awesomeness of the glory, **“Isaiah 6:1-4, “In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!’ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the**

**house was filled with smoke.**” Isaiah is undone and thinks he is a dead man. One of the angels gets a coal off the alter and cleanses his tongue. And then God says, who shall I send? And Isaiah says, here am I, send me! And then you have these words that are quoted above.

I think we think that it would have been a neat experience to be a prophet in the Old Testament. They actually were given direct revelation from God, and then they announced it before the people. But the prophets were eleventh hour messengers, sent to the nation because God was about to judge the nation, and the call was for radical repentance. But that message was basically ignored or despised. In fact, Isaiah’s message all through his life and ministry was going to be rejected by the nation. They would not listen to him. It is said right here in verse 40 taken from Isaiah 6, **“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.”** God had judicially blinded their eyes. They would not hear and turn to the Lord. Listen to how Hebrews 11:36-38 describes the life of many of these prophets, **“Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”**

That is not an ideal or carefree life. That is not what we would deem today ministry success. So why would anyone ever go through that? Why would anyone ever follow the Lord? And here it is. Look at verse 41 again, **“Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him.”** He saw God’s glory and no cost was too great when you see the greater glory of Jesus Christ. It caused him to overcome the fear of man and what man could do to him. Once you are in awe of Christ, and you fear him alone in a reverence than all fears are cast out. And the message in Hebrews 11 is we have that greater glory. We see Jesus in all his glory through the gospels. And anyone who sees the greater glory and need of Jesus and what he has done can never be the same again. He has truly believed on Christ. Isaiah saw his glory, and it changed him so much so that he ministered to a people for the greater glory even though they would not listen to him. It cost him dearly.

There is a cost in following and truly believing of Jesus Christ. The question is twofold: one have you counted the cost. The religious authorities knew that Jesus was the Christ. Again, it is really against logic to come to any other conclusion. You have to close off your rational faculties to come to any other opinion. But the other question is: have you seen the greater glory of Christ - who he is and what he has guaranteed to all who believe on him? Because there is a way that you can tell. And that is with the heart we believe and with the mouth we confess that Jesus is Lord. Isn’t that what we see on the day of Pentecost? How do we know three thousand came to Christ? Unlike the religious authorities they separated from the crowd and came forth to be baptized. There really are no secret followers of Jesus. He is Lord. We live for his glory. May all of us make sure of our calling and election in Jesus Christ. There is nothing more important than his glory.