

Believing Unbelief

In John 12, the religious establishment's opposition to God in Jerusalem is reaching its highest point, and those in religious power are plotting to kill the God-Man, as well as sternly warning the people that if they join Him, they'll be excommunicated from the religious establishment.

At the same time, Jesus is proving beyond the shadow of a doubt that He is Himself the Almighty God our Creator, with power over everything, including life and death. He has called Lazarus forth out of his burial tomb four days after his death to prove it, and multitudes saw it happen.

The result of these two things happening created something among the people that I have seen too many times in my life of ministry. Something I am here calling "believing unbelief." What I mean by that is the phenomenon of someone understanding the gospel message and believing it is true, but not believing unto salvation because he/she makes a choice to not be born again.

Here's how John 12 describes such people, who were no small group that day: "Nevertheless, many did believe in Him even among the rulers, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, so they would not be banned from the synagogue. For they loved praise from men more than praise from God." (John 12:42-43)

Like I said, I've seen that happen too many times myself.

Here in Romania, the predominant religious system is that of eastern orthodoxy. We aren't of that belief, because we believe the Bible and we believe the gospel of salvation received by grace alone through faith in Christ alone. We preach Christ crucified as the sole means of our receiving a right relationship with God and the forgiveness of sins.

When we go out and preach, we don't actively "preach against" eastern orthodoxy. However, when someone hears the true gospel message and the veil is lifted so that they actually understand what they have heard, they immediately know without being told that what they have just heard is a complete "about-face" from what the eastern orthodox priests have always told them.

Now, it is not uncommon for people here to hear the gospel and still have the veil there that keeps them from understanding it, at least at first. But a critical moment comes in the life of those who DO understand the gospel and the salvation offer God is making to them in Christ. Because then that person has a choice to make. He can 1) believe the gospel message is true, or, 2) believe the gospel message is not true, instead believing what the priests teach is actually true. Having shared the gospel one-on-one with hundreds of Romanians of orthodox background, I've seen many in each of those camps.

But the saddest thing is when I see people in camp 1 who still don't get saved.

You see, when they hear the word of God from the Bible, they believe it is true and believe henceforth that what the false priests have been teaching them is wrong. But they make a choice to have "believing unbelief." They make a choice to reject the salvation of a gospel message that they understand is right, because they don't want to lose what they have in their traditional religion. Sometimes they even begin to accept God's word with joy before they make that decision not to trust Christ as their Savior. One man sat in our apartment weeping as he came to understand the gospel message. He said, "Thank you, Dave" for sharing it, before deciding to refuse to pray to Christ and go on his way to continue in his traditions. Another man, when his family was in our home, heard the gospel message and understood it for the first time, and said, "This is the most beautiful message I have ever heard." But he didn't trust Christ as His Savior, either, choosing instead to go back to his own life. Then there was the young woman Lili befriended, who later came to our church's Christmas program. Afterwards, she said that being there and listening to the gospel message that was preached was "the best two hours of my life." But, she said, she would not become a follower of Christ, because she was orthodox and would always remain so.

You see, they don't need our help figuring out that the gospel message isn't what the orthodox church teaches. They already know that. They already know that if they repent and receive a relationship with God, it will mean losing whatever place they have in the orthodox church from which they come. And, sadly, some of them make the wrong choice.

John 12 explains why. They choose to stay in their religious system, knowing that to confess Christ would mean eventual expulsion from it, and desiring the favor and praise of the priests and others in that religious group more than they desire the favor and praise of God.

It's the wrong choice. Because in the end, God is the only one whose favor and praise will be needed or wanted by any of us.

And as I read this passage in John this morning, my heart broke for these and MANY others I have seen over the years, who actually believed the gospel message was true, but chose to continue a life without saving faith in Christ, because they wanted to maintain the culturally-important "orthodox" label.

This also illustrates something we need to know about saving faith. It requires not just knowledge of the gospel message, and not just knowledge of that coupled with belief in its truth. But saving faith requires a third component—the decision to become a believer in Christ. It's not just believing the gospel is true that saves—it is believing the gospel and staking yourself, your future, your soul upon the truth of that message. Evangelist Larry Moyer explains it well, by defining saving faith as a three-pronged condition, involving 1) understanding the gospel message, 2) accepting it as the truth, and 3) trusting in Christ alone to save.

My prayer today is that God will set free someone around me this week from the bondage to religious tradition. That the desire for praise from men will be diminished, and that the gospel message will be believed unto salvation for some soul I meet. I can hardly wait.