



Sermon Study Guide
The Beginning of the End: The People Become What They Worship
John 12:36-43

Introduction—READ John 12:36-43

- Our God is not to be trifled with, and yet we are all tempted to trivialize him. The way Jay Leno made light of the news with his standup comedy, we make light of God with our words and our lives.
- Taking God lightly is dangerous. I grew up close to Mt. Hood, an 11,000-foot summit in Oregon's Cascade Range. Climbers who took that hike lightly flirted with death. The mountain is to be feared and respected and clung to. So is God.
- Our passage today shows what can happen when people trifle with God. God is patient, but he does not tolerate sin forever. At the end of Jesus' public ministry, Jesus leaves the crowd in the dark.
- Questions for further thought:
 - *How do people trifle with God today?*
 - *How are you most tempted to trifle with God?*

First, the Picture of Darkness (John 12:36-37)

- Jesus began addressing a crowd of onlookers in John 12:23. They were not receptive to his teaching. We observe that they were deaf to the voice of the Father (12:29) and they were blind to the meaning of Jesus' death (12:33-34). Jesus warned them to be careful. While he is alive, they are in the light, but he will soon be gone, and they will be in the dark (12:35-36).
- It appears the crowd responded poorly because, as we see in verse 36, Jesus not only departed, he actually hid from them. Jesus is the light, and he removed himself from them, leaving them in the darkness of their sin. Jesus had faithfully and publicly taught them for months, some of them perhaps for years. But now he hid himself from them.
- Jesus' hiding is a picture of spiritual darkness. For the rest of John, until the cross, Jesus would speak only to his closest disciples. His public ministry is over. He has left the people in the dark.
- Questions for further thought:
 - *How have you seen God's faithfulness to you through the years?*
 - *The crowd took Jesus' presence for granted; they wrongly presumed he would stay close to them. How can we have confidence that Jesus will never leave us?*

Second, the Explanation of Darkness (John 12:38-40)

- Most readers of the four Gospels rightly wonder why so many failed to believe in Jesus when he was with them. After all, he performed great miracles and preached amazing sermons. John, however, answered this question. He explained why so many remained in the darkness. In a nutshell, they could not believe because they would not believe. This is the point of the two, OT passages that John cited in verses 38-40.
- John first cites Isaiah 53:1 (see John 12:38). God sent Isaiah to prophecy to Judah. His message in chapters 52-53 is of a Messiah, the suffering Servant, who will give up his life to save God's people. But who are God's people? According to Isaiah, God's people are not just Israel.

Through this Servant, salvation will come to the ends of the earth (see Isa 52:10). In fact, foreign kings who grew up without the benefits of the Law and the preaching of the prophets, would nonetheless shut their mouths in reverence at the Messiah's arrival. This begs the question, "Why didn't Israel believe?" The answer is in Isaiah 53:1—the arm of the Lord wasn't revealed to Israel. This is John's explanation as to why the crowd did not believe Jesus. John 12:28, "to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" Verse 39 is John's summary. Because God had not revealed himself to the people, "they could not believe."

- Why do I say, then, that they could not believe because they would not believe? The answer is in the second quotation John uses, this one from Isaiah 6:9-10. [For this interpretation, I'm indebted to G. K. Beale, author of *We Become What We Worship*].
 - In Isaiah 1-5 the prophet describes generations of Israel's rebellion. It is summarized in 2:8, "Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own hands have made." The people have consistently and profoundly rejected God.
 - There is good news in Isaiah 6. God reveals his glory and raises up a prophet. Isaiah 6:1-8 is the conversion and calling of Isaiah. After seeing the Lord Isaiah is ready to serve God by preaching his word. But what will Isaiah's message for the people be? The answer is in verses 9-10, and it is startling. It appears that God is going to use Isaiah's words to harden the hearts of his people. Because of Isaiah's preaching, the people will have deaf ears and blind eyes.
 - How could this be? What is God doing? I think the answer is in Psalm 115:4-8. Here the psalmist describes the idolatry of Israel. They gave up worship of the LORD and bowed down to statuettes, idols. These idols "have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear" (Psa 115:5-6). So what is God going to do about this idolatry? Verse 8: "Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them." It appears that God is somehow going to make the people like the idols they worship.
 - And this is exactly how God is going to use Isaiah's preaching. Isaiah is God's instrument of judgment to Israel. The people worshipped idols who can't see and can't hear. God is going to hand Israel over to its sin. He's going to make the people spiritually blind and deaf. It's like God is saying to Isaiah, "Isaiah, I've got a job for you. I told my people that if they continued to worship idols, they were going to become like the idols they worshipped. And now, I'm going to keep my word. You go and tell them that I'm going to stop up their ears so they can't hear me, and I'm going to close their eyes, so they can't see me. Tell them they *cannot* believe because they *will not* believe."
- Look again at John 12:40. Jesus has graciously and repeatedly proven himself to the crowd, but still they wouldn't believe. And so Jesus hands them over to their blindness and deafness. They could not believe because they would not believe.
- Questions for further thought:
 - *What does it mean to say that God is sovereign in salvation and judgment? How do we see his sovereignty in John 12:38-40?*
 - *What does it mean to say that we are responsible for our sin, even the sin of unbelief? How do we know, based upon John and Isaiah, that people really are responsible for their sin?*
 - *How would you explain the twin truths of divine sovereignty and human responsibility? How do passages like Genesis 50:20 and John 6:40-44 help?*

Third, the Seduction of Darkness (John 12:41-43)

- It appears that Isaiah was not like the idols the people worshiped. Isaiah had spiritual eyes to see the glory of God (see v. 41). And how do we know Isaiah really saw the LORD? How do we know that Isaiah was spiritually alive? The answer is also in verse 41. The prophet “spoke of him.” Isaiah was not ashamed of God. Unlike the idols Israel once worshipped, Isaiah could truly see and truly hear and truly speak.
- Now look at verse 42. There were some who claimed (at least quietly) to believe in Jesus. John says “they believed in him.” But was their faith genuine? It would seem that it was not real faith since they refused to speak openly about Jesus, “they did not confess” their faith (v. 42). And why did they stay quiet? The answer is in verse 43, “For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”
- By Jesus’ day, “good” Jewish homes had put their idols away. The people had long ago burned down the statuettes they worshipped in Isaiah’s day. But though the people put their idols away, their idolatry remained. Idolatry exists wherever people put anyone or anything before the triune God. Many in Jesus’ day suffered from the idolatry of self—they loved the glory that came to them from man more than the glory that comes from God. These people trivialized God by caring more about getting glory from people than giving glory to God. They had been seduced by the darkness.
- Idolatry is a problem for all of us. We are tempted to love the glory that comes from man or the things man makes, rather than from God. But to live for the glory of anything other than God is to trifle with him, and to deserve his judgment.
- Questions for further thought:
 - *Do you struggle with the idolatry of self regularly drawing attention to yourself because you lust after the attention of others?*
 - *Do you struggle with the idolatry of self by regularly pushing others away because you don’t want them to really know you because you fear if they knew you they wouldn’t like you?*

Conclusion: Where’s the Hope?

- We can love the glory that comes from God more than the glory that comes from man. But to do that, we have to have brand new hearts. Israel had dug a pit of idolatry so deep they could never climb out. Only God can free us from the pit of darkness, and he does it through the cross of Christ. The good news is that Christ died to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. He died so that we could love God more than we love man or anything man can give us. When Jesus died on that cross he didn’t just take away our sin, he gave us the power to resist the seduction of the darkness. He didn’t just die because he loved us; he died so we could love him.
- Questions for further thought:
 - *Carefully read 1 Peter 2:24. How have you specifically died to sin?*
 - *How would you explain to an unbeliever why the cross is necessary?*
 - *Do you regularly thank God for a heart that truly loves him?*