

Exposition of the Gospel of John CHAPTER 44

CHRIST'S MINISTRY REVIEWED

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Transcript

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John 12:37-50

The following is an Analysis of the closing section of John 12:— 1. The nation's response to Christ's ministry, verse 37. 2. The forecast of Israel's unbelief by Isaiah, verses 38-41. 3. The condition of those who had been impressed by Christ, verses 42, 43. 4. Christ's teaching about His relation to the Father, verses 44, 45. 5. Christ's teaching concerning the design of His ministry, verses 46, 47. 6. Christ's teaching concerning the doom of all who despised Him, verses 48, 49. 7. Christ's teaching concerning the way of life, verse 50. The passage before us is by no means an easy one to understand. The previous section closes as follows: "These things spake Jesus, and departed, and did hide himself from them" (John 12:36). Many have thought, and we believe rightly so, that this statement brings the public ministry of Christ to a close in this Gospel. When we enter the thirteenth chapter it is very evident that a new section there begins, for from the beginning of 13 to the end of 17 the Lord is alone with His apostles; while in the 18th He is arrested and led to judgment. But if John 12:36 marks the ending of Christ's public ministry, how are we to understand the verses which follow to the end of the chapter? especially in view of what is said in verse 44: "Jesus cried and said," etc. Now, we believe the answer to this question has been well stated by Dr. John Brown: "The paragraph itself (John 12:37-50) is of a peculiar, I had almost said unique, structure and character. The history of our Lord's public ministry is closed. It terminates in the verse immediately preceding. The account of His private interview with His friends, previous to His passion, is about to commence. It begins with the first verse of the following chapter. One scene in the eventful history is closed; another is about to open. The curtain is, as it were, falling upon the theater in which the public acts of Jesus were performed, and the Evangelist is about to conduct us into the sacred circle of His disciples, and communicate to us the sublime and consoling conversations which the Redeemer, full of love, had with them before His final departure. But before He does this he makes a pause in the narrative, and, as it were, looks back and around; and, in the paragraph before us, presents us in a few sentences with a brief but comprehensive view of all the Lord had taught and done during the course of His public ministry, and of the effects which His discourses and miracles had produced on the

great body of His countrymen. John here gives us a resume of Christ's public ministry, mentioning His miracles and recapitulating His teaching. The closing section of John 12 forms an epilogue to that chapter of our Lord's life which had just been brought to a close in John 12:36. Four vital truths which had occupied a prominent place in Christ's oral ministry are here singled out: His appeal to the Father which sent Him (John 12:44, 45, 49); Himself the Light of the world (John 12:46); the danger of unbelief (John 12:47-49); the end of faith (John 12:50). The Holy Spirit's design in moving John to pen this section was, we believe, at least two-fold: to explain the seeming failure of Christ's public ministry, and to show that the guilt of unbelief rested inexcusably upon Israel. "The rejection of Jesus Christ by the great body of His fellow-countrymen, the Jews, is a fact which, at first view, may seem to throw suspicion on the greatness of His claims to a Divine mission, as indicating the evidence adduced in their support did not serve its purpose with those to whom it was originally presented, and who, in some points of view, were placed in circumstances peculiarly favorable for forming a correct estimate of its validity. It may be supposed that had the proofs of His Divine mission and Messiahship been as strong and striking as the friends of Christianity represent them, the prejudices of the Jews, powerful as they unquestionably were, must have given way before them; and the believers of His doctrine must have been as numerous as the witnesses of His miracles. Such a supposition, though plausible, argues on the part of its supporters, imperfect and incorrect views of the human constitution, intellectually and morally" (Ibid). In other words, it ignores the total depravity of man! Now, in the closing section of John 12 the Holy Spirit has most effectively disposed of the above objection. He has done so by directing our attention to Old Testament predictions which accurately forecast the very reception which the Messiah met with from the Jews. First, Isaiah 53 is referred to, for in this chapter it was plainly foretold that He should be "despised and rejected of men." And then Isaiah 6 is quoted, a passage which tells of God judicially blinding His people because of their inveterate unbelief. Thus the very objection made against Christianity is turned into a most conclusive argument in its favor. The very fact that the Lord Jesus was put to death by His countrymen demonstrates that He is their Messiah! Thus has God, once more, made "the wrath of man to praise him." "But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him" (John 12:37). Fearful proof was this of the depravity of the human heart. The miracles of Christ were neither few in number nor unimpressive in nature. The Lord Jesus performed prodigies of power of almost every conceivable kind. He healed the sick, expelled demons, controlled the winds, walked on the sea, turned water into wine, revealed to men their secret thoughts, raised the dead. His miracles were wrought openly, in the light of day, before numerous witnesses. Nevertheless "they"—the nation at large—"believed not on him." Altogether inexcusable was their hardness of heart. All who heard His teaching and witnessed His works, ought, without doubt, to have received Him as their Divinely-accredited Messiah and Savior. But the great majority of His countrymen refused to acknowledge His claims. "The prevalence of unbelief and indifference in the present day ought not to surprise us. It is just one of the evidences of that mighty foundation-doctrine, the total corruption and fall of man. How feebly we grasp and realize that doctrine is proved by our surprise at human incredulity. We only half believe the heart's deceitfulness. Let us read our Bibles more attentively, and search their contents more carefully. Even when Christ wrought miracles and preached sermons there were numbers of His hearers who remained utterly unmoved. What right have we to wonder if the hearers of modern sermons in countless instances remain unbelieving? 'The disciple is not greater than his Master.' If even the hearers of Christ did not believe, how much more should we expect to find unbelief among the hearers of His ministers? Let the truth be spoken and confessed: man's obstinate unbelief is one among many of the indirect proofs that the Bible is true" (Bishop Ryle). "That the saying of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?" (John 12:38). This does not mean that the Jews

continued in unbelief with the conscious design of fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. Nor does the Holy Spirit here teach that God exercised a secret influence upon the hearts of the Jews, which prevented them from believing, in order that the prophecy of Isaiah might not fail of accomplishment. The Jews did fulfill the predictions of Isaiah, but it was ignorantly and unwittingly, As one able expositor has well said, "The true interpretation here depends on the fact, that the participle rendered that, in the sense of in order that, sometimes signifies so that, pointing out, not the connection of cause and effect, but that of antecedent and consequence, prediction and accomplishment. For example, in the question of the disciples, 'Who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' the meaning plainly is, 'Is this man's blindness the consequence of his parents' sin, or of his own in some preexistent state?'" We believe it had been better to render it thus: "They believed not, consequently the saying of Isaiah was fulfilled." God does not have to put forth any power to cause any sinner not to believe: if He leaves him to himself, he never will believe. It is highly significant that Isaiah 53 opens in the way it does. That remarkable chapter tells of the treatment which the Savior met with from Israel when He was here the first time. As is well known, the Jews will not own it as a prophecy concerning the Messiah: some of them have attempted to apply it to Jeremiah, others to the nation. How striking then that the Triune-God has opened it with the question, "Who hath believed our report?" Most suitably does John apply it to the unbelieving nation in his day. "And to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" The "arm of the Lord" signifies the power of God as it had been manifested by the Messiah. There are therefore two things here: "Who hath believed our report?" points to Christ's oral ministry; "to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" to His miracles. "Therefore they could not believe, because that Isaiah said again" (John 12:39). This is exceedingly solemn. It is explained in the next verse. In consequence of their rejection of Christ, the nation as a whole was judicially blinded of God, that is, they were left to the darkness and hardness of their own evil hearts. But it is most important to mark the order of these two statements: in John 12:37 they did not believe; here in John 12:39, they could not believe. The most attractive appeals had been made: the most indubitable evidence had been presented: yet they despised and rejected the Redeemer. They would not believe; in consequence, God gave them up, and now they could not believe. The harvest was vast, the summer was ended, and they were not saved. But the fault was entirely theirs, and now they must suffer the just consequences of their wickedness. "He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them" (John 12:40). This was God's response to the wicked treatment which Israel had meted out to His beloved Son. They had refused the light, now darkness shall be their dreadful portion. They had rejected the truth, now a heart which loved error should be the terrible harvest. Blinded eyes and a hardened heart have belonged to Israel ever since; only thus can we account for their continued unbelief all through these nineteen centuries; only thus can we explain Israel's attitude toward Christ to-day. "All through His Divine ministry in this Gospel, the Lord had been acting in grace, as the 'son of the Father' and as 'the light of the world.' His presence was day-time in the land of Israel. He had been shining there, if haply the darkness might comprehend Him, and here, at the close of His ministry (John 12:35, 36) we see Him still as the light casting forth His last beams upon the land and the people. He can but shine, whether they will comprehend Him or not. While His presence is there it is still day-time. The night cannot come till He is gone. 'As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world!' But here, He 'departed and did hide himself from them' (John 12:36); and then God, by His prophet, brings the night upon the land: John 12:40" (Mr. J. G. Bellett). Fearfully solemn is it to remember that what God did here unto Israel He will shortly do with the whole of unbelieving Christendom: "And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believe not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thess. 2:11, 12). Just as in the days of Nimrod God "gave up" the entire Gentile world

because they despised and rejected the revelation which He had given them (Rom. 1); just as He abandoned Israel to their unbelief, through the rejection of His Son; so in a soon-coming day He will cause unfaithful Christendom to receive the Antichrist because "they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved" (2 Thess. 2:10). Oh, dear reader, be warned by this. It is an unspeakably solemn thing to trifle with the overtures of God's grace. It is written, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" (Heb. 2:3). Then "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near" (Isa. 55:6). "These things said Isaiah, when he saw his glory, and spake of him" (John 12:41). A striking testimony is this to the absolute Deity of Christ. The prediction quoted in the previous verse is found in Isaiah 6. At the beginning of that chapter the prophet sees "Jehovah sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple." Above the throne stood the seraphim, with veiled face, crying, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts." The sight was too much for Isaiah, and he cried, "Woe is me! for I am undone." Then a live coal was taken from off the altar and laid upon his mouth, and thus cleansed, he is commissioned to go forth as God's messenger. And here the Holy Spirit tells us in John 12, "These things said Isaiah, when he saw his glory, and spake of him"—the context makes it unmistakably plain that the reference is to the Lord Jesus. One of the sublimest descriptions of the manifested Deity found in all the Old Testament is here applied to Christ. That One born in Bethlehem's manger was none other than the Throne-Sitter before whom the seraphim worship. "Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue" (John 12:42). Here is a statement which affords help on such verses as John 2:23; John 7:31; John 8:30; John 10:42; John 11:45; John 12:11. In each of these passages we read of many "believing" on the Lord Jesus, concerning whom there is nothing to show that they had saving faith. In the light of the verse now before us it would seem that John, all through his Gospel, divides the unbelieving into two classes: the hardened mass who were altogether unmoved by the wondrous works of Christ; and a company, evidently by no means small, upon whom a temporary impression was made, but yet who failed to yield their hearts captive to the Savior—the fear of man, and loving the praise of man, holding them back. And do we not find the same two classes in Christendom to-day? By far the greater number of those who come under the sound of the Gospel remain unmoved, heeding neither its imperative authority nor being touched by its winsome tidings. They are impervious to every appeal. But there is another class, and its representatives are to be found, perhaps, in every congregation; a class who are affected in some measure by the Word of the Cross. They do not despise its contents, yet, neither are their hearts won by it. On the one hand, they are not openly antagonistic; on the other, they are not out and out Christians. "Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue." This points a most solemn warning to the class we have just mentioned above. A faith which does not confess Christ is not a saving faith. The New Testament is very explicit on this. Said the Lord Jesus, "Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God: But he that denieth me before men shall be denied before the angels of God" (Luke 12:8, 9). And in the Epistle to the Romans we are told, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (John 10:9). These Jews referred to in our text were satisfied that Christ was neither an impostor nor a fanatic, yet were they not prepared to forsake all and follow Him. They feared the consequences of such a course, for the Jews had agreed already that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue" (John 9:22). These men then deemed it wisest to conceal their convictions and wait until the Messiah should place Himself in such a position that it would be safe and advantageous for them to avow themselves His disciples. They were governed by self-interest, and they have had many successors. If any should read these lines who are attempting to be

secret disciples of the Lord Jesus, fearing to come out into the open and acknowledge by lip and life that He is their Lord and Savior, let them beware. Remember that the first of the eight classes mentioned in Revelation 21:8 who are cast into the lake of fire are the "fearful"! "For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (John 12:43). 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? "What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" How we are reminded of our Savior's words, "How can ye believe which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that cometh from God only?" (John 5:44). Let us remember that we cannot have both the good-will of sinners and the good-will of God: "Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4). "Jesus cried and said, He that believeth on me, believeth not on me, but on him that sent me" (John 12:44). Notice that nothing whatever is said about either the time or the place where the Savior made this utterance. We believe that John still continues his epilogue, giving us in John 12:44-50 a summary, of Christ's teaching. The substance of what he here says plainly indicates this. "How strange that this supposed discourse of Jesus should to an extent of which there is no previous example, consist of repetitions alone, and, moreover, of only such words as are already found in John's Gospel. Did the Lord ever recapitulate in this style, uttering connectedly so long a discourse without any new thoughts and distinct sayings? but, when for once St. John recapitulates, seeming (though only seeming) to put his words into the Lord's lips, what an instructive example he gives us, not venturing to add anything of his own! Yea, verily, all this the Lord had said, each saying in its season; but St John unites them all retrospectively together" (Stier). The tense of the verbs here, "Jesus cried and said," signify, as Stier and Alford have pointed out, that Christ was wont to, that it was His customary course of repeated action. "And he that seeth me seeth him that sent me" (John 12:45). That John is giving us in these verses a summary of the teachings of Christ is evidenced by a comparison of them with earlier statements in this Gospel. For example: compare "He that believeth on me, believeth not on me, but on him that sent me" (John 12:44) with John 5:24—"He that heareth my word and believeth on him that sent me." So here: "He that seeth me seeth him that sent me." Compare with this John 8:19, "If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also;" and John 10:38, "That ye may know and believe that the Father is in me, and I in him." This was one of the vital truths which occupied a prominent place in our Lord's teachings. No man had seen God at any time, but the only begotten Son had come here to "declare" Him (John 1:18). What we have here in John 12:45 is a reference to the frequent mention made by Christ to that mysterious and Divine union which existed between Himself and the Father. "I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness" (John 12:46). Clearly this is parallel with John 8:12 and John 9:5: "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness... As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." "I am come a light into the world": upon this verse Dr. John Brown has the following helpful comments: "This proves, first, that Christ existed before His incarnation, even as the sun exists before it appears above the eastern hills; second, it is implied that He is the one Savior of the world, as there is but one sun; third, that He came, not for one nation only, but for all; even as the sun's going forth is from the end of the heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it; and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof." This verse continues John's reference to the general teaching of Christ concerning the character and tendency of His mission. He had come here into this world as a light-revealing God and

exposing man—and this, in order that all who believed on Him should be delivered from the darkness, that is, from the power of Satan (Col. 1:13) and the ruin of sin (Eph. 4:18). "And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world but to save the world" (John 12:47). Here the Evangelist calls attention to another truth which had held a prominent place in our Lord's teachings. It respected His repeated announcement concerning the character and design of His mission and ministry. It tells of the lowly place which He had taken, and of the patient grace which marked Him during the time that He tabernacled among men. It brings into sharp contrast the purpose and nature of His two advents. When He returns to this earth it will be in another character and with a different object from what was true of Him when He was here the first time. Before, He was here as a lowly servant; then, He shall appear as the exalted Sovereign. Before, He came to woo and win men; then, He shall rule over them with a rod of iron. "And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not." With this compare verse 45, "Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. For I came not to judge the world, but to save the world," compare with this John 3:17, "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved," and note our original comments upon John 3:17. "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day" (John 12:48). This solemn utterance of Christ corrects an erroneous conclusion which has been drawn by some Calvinists, who deny the responsibility of unregenerate souls in connection with the Gospel. They argue that because the natural man is devoid of spiritual life, he cannot believe; a dead man, they say, cannot receive Christ. To this it might be replied, A dead man cannot reject Christ. But many do! It is true that a dead man cannot believe, yet he ought to. His inability lies not in the absence of necessary faculties, but in the wilful perversion of his faculties. When Adam died spiritually, nothing in him was annihilated; instead, he became "alienated from the life of God" (Eph. 4:18). Every man who hears the Gospel ought to believe in Christ, and those who do not will yet be punished for this unbelief, see 2 Thessalonians 1:7. As Christ here teaches, the rejector of Him will be judged for his sin. Let any unsaved one who reads these lines thoughtfully ponder this solemn word of the Lord. Jesus. "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him." The first part of this verse is almost identical with what we read of in John 3:18: "But he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." "The words that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last. day." This takes us back to Deuteronomy 18:19, where, of the great Prophet God promised to raise up unto Israel He declared, "And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him." "The word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day." Very solemn indeed is this, for its application is to all who have heard the Gospel. It tells us three things. First, there is to be a "last day." This world will not remain forever. The bounds of its history, the length of its existence are Divinely determined, and when the appointed limit is reached, "The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (2 Pet. 3:10). Second, this last day will be one of judgment: "Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained" (Acts 17:31). Then shall hidden things be brought to light: the righteous vindicated, and the unrighteous sentenced. Then shall God's broken law be magnified, and His holy justice honored. Then shall all His enemies be subjugated and God shall demonstrate that He is GOD. Then shall every proud rebel be made to bow in subjection before that Name which is above every name, and confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Third, Christ's Word will judge sinners in that Day. His Word was a true Word, a Divine Word, a Word suited to men. Yet men have slighted it, attacked it, denied it, made its holy contents the subject of blasphemous jesting. But in the last

great Day it shall judge them. First and foremost among the "books" which shall be opened and out of which sinners shall be "judged" (Rev. 20:12) will be, we believe, the written Word of God—"In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel" (Rom. 2:16). "For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak" (John 12:49). This was something which Christ had affirmed repeatedly, see John 5:30; 7:16; 8:26-28, etc. It expressed that intimate and mysterious union which existed between the Father and Himself. His purpose was to impress upon the Jews the awfulness of their sin in refusing His words: in so doing, they affronted the Father Himself, for His were the very words which the Son had spoken to them. In like manner, to-day, "he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son" (1 John 5:10). How terrible then is the sin of despising the testimony of Christ! "And I know that his commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto me, so I speak" (John 12:50). This is an abstract of what we read of in John 3:11; 5:32; 8:55. It brings out once more the perfections of the incarnate Son. He acted not in independency, but in perfect oneness of heart, mind, and will, with the Father. Whether the Jews believed them or not, the messages which Christ had delivered were Divinely true, and therefore were they words of life to all who receive them by simple faith. This closing sentence in John's summary of Christ's teachings is very comprehensive: "whatsoever" He had spoken, was that which He had received of the Father. Therefore in refusing to heed the teaching of Christ, the Jews had despised the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. "And I know that his commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto me, so I speak" (John 12:50). Once more we have a declaration which is not confined to its local application. This verse speaks in clarion tones to all who come under the sound of the Gospel to-day. God has given not an "invitation" for men to act on at their pleasure, but a "commandment" which they disobey at their imminent peril. That commandment is "that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 3:23), hence at the beginning of the Epistle to the Romans, where Paul refers to the Gospel of God, he says, "By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for faith—obedience among all nations" (John 1:5). This commandment is "life everlasting" to all who receive it by the obedience of faith. Adam brought death upon him by disobeying God's commandment: we receive life by obeying God's commandment. Then "see that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven" (Heb. 12:25). Study the following questions in view of our next lesson:— 1. What is meant by the last clause of verse 1? 2. What "supper" is referred to in verse 2? 3. What is the symbolic significance of Christ's actions in verse 4? 4. What is signified by the washing of the disciples' feet, verse 5? 5. Why is Peter so prominent in verses 6-9? 6. What is meant by "no part with Me" verse 8? 7. What is the meaning of verse 10?

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