

Hard But Good

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[0 : 00] Well, as I said today, we are continuing our study on John's Gospel. We've come to the last part of chapter 12, and we're going to look at some, a fairly broad bit of the chapter, but we can read again, verses 42 to 43. 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 to the synagogue, for they love the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. Now, I'm sure everybody here would agree that one of the, one of maybe the most frustrating aspects of life today is that very often people are unwilling to give us a straight answer about anything.

And the place where you perhaps see that most of all is in politics. And this last week's been a good example. About a week ago, all the reporters were asking Rishi Sunak, are you going to scrap HS2, the northern bit?

And he wouldn't give us a straight answer. Didn't want to say anything. We're starting to dodge the question. And for days, the headlines were saying, Sunak won't give a clear answer about HS2. And then sure enough, was a Thursday conference announcement, they're canceling it. But for days, he was trying to dodge the question, did not want to give us a straight answer.

[1 : 18] And it's not just Sunak, everybody does it. I remember, I think I've said this before, but I've never forgotten it. I remember once there was a leadership election, I think it was for the Conservative Party, and there was one of these TV kind of question sessions where people were able to ask questions of all the candidates.

And somebody came on and asked a question about climate change, and they said, will all of you candidates commit to making the UK carbon neutral by 2025 instead of 2040?

And all of them had said that they were going to do it by 2040, but the questioner, who was, she looked like she was a teenager, said, are you going to commit to doing it by 2025 instead of 2040? Now, that was a very noble aspiration by somebody who was clearly concerned about climate change. But everybody knew that there was a very clear and very simple answer to her question. The answer to the question was, no. Because she was asking for the impossible. And everybody knew that. It was completely obvious for everyone.

[2 : 21] But none of the candidates said that. They all gave this really kind of waffly, vey kind of answer, oh, we're really committed to climate change. And I was like, whoever says no, well, not that I was a member of the Conservative Party, but if I was, I was thinking, whoever says no is the one I'm going to vote for. But of course none of them did.

They were all just avoiding a straight answer, even though everybody knew it. And there's that growing frustration, I think, among people today.

And you see it in the general public in our culture just now. People get frustrated, even annoyed by these kind of vague answers that politicians tend to give in it. And it's actually, I think, it's actually a very dangerous trend.

Because what it tends to produce, what it tends to result in is that often in politics today, the only people who give straight answers are the ones who are at the extremes politically, either far left or far right. They're quite happy to give straight answers.

And because they have very clear sort of views and they don't care if they offend people. And what tends to happen is that the general public that are craving straight answers are drawn to these extremes, not because they share the ideology, but because they're just long for somebody who talks straight.

[3 : 43] And you can see that not just in politics, you see it in every part of life. At work, you know, you just want straight answers from your colleagues and your supervisors.

Same in communities, the same in churches. So often people will avoid giving straight answers. And it's not hard to see why this happens. Because when we're faced with differing opinions, when we're faced with a crowd that you want to keep on side, a vague answer feels so much easier. And so politicians will opt for these kind of waffly answers because it's by far the easy option. Vague, non-committal answers are easy. But I think everyone here would agree that although they're easy, they're also rubbish.

And in contrast to that easy but rubbish vagueness that we see in society today, the Gospel gives us the exact opposite.

[4 : 56] It gives us a message that is hard but good. And that's our title today. Now when I say hard, I don't mean harsh or cruel.

That's not what I mean at all. And I don't actually mean hard to understand either. What I mean is that for many people the Gospel is hard to accept. When I say hard, I mean hard to accept. And when I say good, I don't mean just nice or positive or friendly. I mean impeccably, irrevocably, uncompromisingly good.

And as we think about that title, we've got two headings that we'll go through together. One message that's hard but good, a response that looks easier but is not better.

So we start with this one, a message that's hard but good. Last week we observed that in John's Gospel we're moving fast towards the climax, towards the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

[6 : 01] And we said last week that chapter 12 is a crucial turning point. Jesus enters Jerusalem and at verse 23 he makes the pivotal statement. The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

Earlier in John's Gospel there's lots of times where it says his hour has not yet come. Now Jesus says the hour has come. And he's going to be glorified through the cross and through the empty tomb.

That's everything that his mission is building up towards. And yet again we've seen this so many times in John's Gospel. This provokes a mixed response from the crowds. And people are watching what's going on and they're wondering what's happened.

And you see that in verse 34. The crowd come questioning, we've heard from the law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is the Son of Man?

All these questions they're trying to figure out what is going on.

And Jesus responds to them by explaining his mission in terms of darkness and light. Jesus said to them, the light is among you for a little while longer.

[7 : 06] Walk while you have the light, let darkness overtake you. The one who walks in darkness does not know where he's going. While you have the light, believe in the light that you may become sons of the light.

When Jesus had said these things he departed and hid himself from them. Now that language of light and darkness is really important because it's a theme that's been running through John's Gospel.

All the way through. You actually see it at the very start in John's opening verses. He says, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness is not overcome it. He's talking about Jesus coming.

He then says that there was a man sent from God. His name was John John the Baptist that's referring to. He came as a witness to bear witness about the light. That's Jesus that all we believe through him. He was not the light but he came to bear witness about the light, the true light, which gives light to everyone who's coming into the world.

Same again in John 3. It says there, this is the judgment. The light has come into the world and people love the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. And then you have the great words in John 8 that we looked at a few weeks ago.

[8 : 11] Jesus spoke to them and said, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life. And the key point is this, Jesus is speaking about his identity and his mission in terms of light and darkness.

In other words, he is talking dead straight. It's light or it's darkness. There's no vagueness, no compromise, no waffle, no middle ground.

It is as clear as it gets, the message of the gospel is a choice between darkness and light. And that echoes a theme that runs right through Scripture.

From the very beginning when God began unfolding his purpose through creation, what was the first thing he said? Let there be light. And going right to the very end, the eschatological goal, and that is the goal at the very end of God's time is set before us in terms of two possibilities.

The light of Heaven's glory and beauty or the outer darkness of hell. And throughout the whole of Scripture in between, you've got the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil set before us as a contrast between light and darkness.

[9 : 35] It's a simple, clear, straight talking message, darkness or light. But that kind of stark choice, that kind of unambiguous either or that the gospel presents to us, is a hard message for us to hear.

And we struggle with it for lots and lots of reasons. We struggle with it because we are not the ones setting the terms. And that's something that we all find difficult, that God is coming to us saying, this is the way it is.

And in a way, we're kind of backed into a corner where we have to accept those terms. And often we don't like that. We also struggle with it because although we recognize that light is good, we are attracted to darkness.

And there's sin, there's behavior, there's things, temptations that we do, we all struggle with. And there's a kind of temptation there for us.

We struggle with this contrast between light and darkness because it leaves us feeling exposed. And we think, I don't want the darkness of my life to ever be scrutinized.

[10 : 48] But maybe the reason we struggle with it most of all is because it's just so, so serious.

Because nothing actually matters more than this. And sometimes we just blast through life full of distractions. And those moments when we stop to think about the big questions of life and death, time and eternity, of truth and myth, these are hard things to think about.

And because of all that, there's a key truth that arises from all of this and it's highlighted for us in this passage. And the key truth is this.

A hard message will either penetrate your heart or harden your heart. It'll either penetrate your heart or harden your heart.

And you see that in this passage. You see it in the words that we read in verses 37 to 41, speaking about how these people saw many signs but they still did not believe.

[12 : 04] And in these verses, John is giving his own reflections about how the people were responding. And he's highlighting that even though some people saw great things, all that happened was that their hearts were hardened.

And that could be a hard thing for us to think about because it seems so wrong. You think surely God's message should not harden people's hearts. You're like, the Gospel, this is the greatest thing that anybody's ever heard. Why would that? How could that harden people?

But it does. The same message can either penetrate a heart or harden a heart. And we might think that doesn't seem right, but it actually happens in our own experience all the time.

Imagine that you know two people and maybe in their early teens, maybe they're in first or second year, the years of life when you think you know it all, when you're actually a clown.

And I say that having been one myself, perhaps the biggest one of all. And two friends, they start smoking as they think, oh, that's cool, that'll make me popular. And you know, maybe later on, they've been smoking for two or three years, they both go along to the doctor and the doctor says to them both the same thing, says, look, you've got to stop.

[13 : 20] And one of them hears that message and thinks, yeah, I know, right, I'm going to stop. And they stop. And the other thinks, nah, I am not doing that. Forget it. Forget it.

And doesn't care. The same message has penetrated one heart and hardened another. Or perhaps even more likely, you maybe have experienced this where people have fallen out and maybe you've fallen out with two people, maybe, and maybe it was your fault or at least partly your fault, something you said or done and there's a fallout and you think, right, I want to put this right.

And so you message them both and you say, can we meet for a coffee and you bring them a gift.

And you think, you know, I just want to say I am really sorry for what I said. I shouldn't have done it. I want to apologize and I want to put things right.

One of them hears that and accepts your apology. And they say, look, it's okay. Let's forget about it. And the friendship is restored. But the other is sitting there in front of you thinking they want something.

They're just going to manipulate me. They don't mean it. Same message penetrates one heart, hardens another.

[14 : 36] And that is what happens with the Gospel. So much so that John quotes Isaiah as you have in the verses on the screen to highlight that God knew that this is how it was going to be. This doesn't surprise God. For some, the message is going to penetrate their hearts.

For others, it will harden them. Later in the New Testament, Paul speaks about this really clearly. He speaks about Jews and Greeks. He says, Jews demand signs. Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified.

We preach the Gospel. It's a stumbling block to the Jews. It's folly to the Gentiles. But to those who are called both Jews and Greeks, it's the power of God and the wisdom of God. That verse is just explaining that for some people, the Gospel is just a stumbling block.

For other people, it's just crazy. But for some, it is the power of God for their salvation. It's the same message to all. It's penetrates some hearts, hardens others.

And I guess the key point is this. You've got to let the Gospel penetrate your heart. In other words, you've got to take it seriously.

[15 : 47] You've got to recognize that when Jesus talks straight like this, He is not doing it to spoil your life. He's doing it in order to give you life.

And that's why we mustn't kind of flirt with the Gospel. We mustn't just kind of brush against it. We mustn't dabble with it. We must let it penetrate our hearts.

I'm going to give you an illustration from my engineering days. Did anybody drill stainless steel in the past week? Sure, you probably didn't. Once the following time, I would have. That would have been a big part of my life.

If anybody has drilled stainless steel in your life, you will know exactly what I'm talking about. When you're drilling through metal, usually it's straightforward enough. You just get your drill. It's just like drilling woods. It's just a wee bit harder.

But you've got your drill. Metal cutting drill bit will cut through it, no problem. And normal metal is absolutely fine. With stainless steel, you have to be extremely careful. Because when you're going to drill a piece of stainless steel, whether it's a sheet or whatever, if when you put the drill bit up to the stainless steel, if you rub the surface of the stainless steel instead of cut, if you just rub the surface with the drill, in other words, if you don't push hard enough, you just rub it, then the stainless steel gets hot and you get like a disk of metal that goes rock hard.

[17 : 08] And so you can't then drill into it. So you've rubbed against it and you've created this hardened layer, a bit like a blister I suppose. It doesn't look like a blister, but that's maybe a way of describing it. Just a hardened ring of stainless steel and you can't get through it.

And you're starting to have a radius, and nothing's happening because it's gone hard. Because you've rubbed it. You've just rubbed against the metal. And the key thing you have to make sure you do is don't just rub against it. You have to drill with commitment, with confidence, with conviction.

You just have to go for it. It doesn't mean you smash the drill bit into it, but you just make sure you keep pushing and you keep going. The drill has got to penetrate into the stainless steel. It must not rub because if it rubs, it will just harden.

If it penetrates, it will cut right through. And that is teaching us exactly what it's like with the gospel. We can't just let it rub against us. We've got to let it penetrate our hearts.

And so you might be thinking, well, how do I do that? Thomas, how do I do that? Well, one of the key things you have to do is to recognize that the gospel isn't just hard, in the sense that it's hard to accept.

[18 : 18] You've got to recognize the gospel is utterly, impeccably good. That's one of the key things that we've got to recognize.

And as we said, that light-darkness contrast, it runs right through scripture, and it carries several important emphases and connotations. Light in the Bible, it speaks of purity.

So God is calling us into His light. That didn't work. He's calling us into His light. In other words, He's calling us away from darkness, calling us away from sin, calling us away from behavior that is evil, calling us away from behavior that leaves us guilty before God, and calling us away from behavior that ruins our lives.

Because everything that causes heartbreak in your lives and in the world around you is all a result of sin. The purity of God's light is calling us away from that. Light also speaks of knowledge. I was going to put a verse up, sorry. Ephesians 5, that speaks about light as purity, not taking part in the fruits of darkness. Light also speaks of knowledge.

[19 : 31] We read this at the start. The God who said, let the light shine out of darkness, has shone into your hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus. In other words, God is calling us away from ignorance, and from foolishness, and from guessing about the biggest questions in life.

And instead, He's revealing the truth to us, the truth about Him, about us, about life, about our origins, about our destiny.

And so it speaks of knowledge. The last thing that light speaks of, well, the third thing that light speaks of, the last one I want to highlight, is that it speaks of beauty and energy.

You see that captured in these verses in Isaiah 60, that eyes shine for your light has come, the glory of the Lord has risen upon you, behold, darkness shall cover the earth, thick darkness the peoples, but the Lord will arise upon you, His glories will be seen upon you, nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

Lift up your eyes all around and see, they all gather together, they come to you, your sons shall come from afar, your daughters shall be carried on the hip, then you shall see and be radiant, your heart shall fill and exalt, the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of nations shall come to you.

[20 : 47] It's just a beautiful picture of the beauty and energy and splendor that light brings. And we know that that's true, we observe it ourselves, science proves it, light is beautiful, and it provides energy.

It's a source, a key type of energy, and a source of energy, and all of that is telling us that God is calling us away from a life that is dull and depressing.

And instead, He is bringing so much that is good and joyful and brilliant and wonderful into our lives. The Gospel is a message of light instead of darkness. That's so good. It's everything that we need. And all of it is centered on Jesus. He's the one who's come to deal with our sin. He's the one who's come to reveal truth to us. He's the one who's come to equip and energize us to live for Him.

[21 : 49] He's the one who's come to shine on us with all the beauty of His person and purposes. And yes, we might find that stark choice between light and darkness hard to take, but when we think about it, we see that that message is so, so good.

Yes, it might be hard to take, but it's so good. And if you struggle to see that, then there's one more point I want you to note.

Sometimes it's possible for us to be not convinced of how good the Gospel is because we don't see how beautiful the light is. So some people will be like, well, I'm not that bothered about the Gospel. I don't think it's that big a deal because you don't see the light of the Gospel in its beauty. That can happen to people. But the other thing that can happen to people, and this is maybe the more common, it's not that you don't see how bright the light is, it's that you don't see how dark darkness really is.

I was chatting to some friends of mine a couple of weeks ago, they were talking about somebody who had, they knew two people, and one of them, they were two friends, but one of the friends was a drug user and had become a drug addict.

[23 : 10] But they were still friends. One had never gone down that road, but one was in the grip of addiction, but still they were friends. And the drug user was speaking about their struggles with their friend, and they said to their friend, if you ever try drugs, I will kill the person who gave them to you.

If you ever try these drugs that I'm taking, that I'm addicted to, if you ever try them, I will kill the person who gave them to you. Now, I'm not advocating death threats, but there is a very, very important point being made there.

That drug user was prepared to kill someone, or at least a threat to kill somebody, to protect their friend from ever trying drugs. Why did they do that? Why did they speak like that?

It's because they knew how dark the darkness of addiction really is. And that is teaching us and reminding us that sin is an utterly devastating enemy.

When we're talking about darkness, we don't just mean like, ugh, we could gloomy, we're talking about everything that's awful in life. And we must make no mistake that the devil only ever has one

goal, and that goal is to destroy you, to wreck your life, and to wreck the lives of your family, your friends, and your community.

[24 : 45] And maybe, for some people, our hearts are hard towards the Gospel, because our attitude towards sin is far too soft.

The Gospel is a hard message. It's a stark choice between light and darkness, between following Jesus or rejecting Him. But that message is so good, and it's promising us an eternity with Jesus, where there will never, ever, ever be any more darkness again.

And all of that challenges us in terms of how we respond to the Gospel. And that's something that every single one of us has to think about, how am I responding to what Jesus is saying to me? And that raises a final crucial point in our passage. And it's the second point, which is much, much shorter. I should have said it at the start. The first bit was wee bit longer. This is just my last point. In this passage, we also have a response that looks easier, but that's not better. Now, I love how beautifully clear and honest and realistic John's Gospel is.

[25 : 58] In verses 35 to 41, he's making it clear that the Gospel is driving us into these two options, darkness or light, where the message hardens our heart or penetrates our heart, where we either reject Jesus or follow Him.

And there's this great kind of push between two options. But then, in verses 42 to 43, John immediately tells us that people desperately want to be in the middle.

They desperately want to find middle ground. And what's been described here, we can kind of draw it in this way, where this is where we reject Jesus and we're hardened.

And this is where we follow Jesus. We look to Him, we live for Him, and the Gospel has penetrated their hearts.

And yet so many of us want to be here. We want to be in the middle.

[27 : 10] And that's exactly what you have with these authorities here. These people, they believe in Jesus, they don't want to tell people, they're scared about the consequences of it.

And so they want to be kind of in the middle. And I can totally understand why people want to be in the middle, because it feels so much easier. We want to come to church, we want to listen, we even want to serve.

We admire Jesus, but I'm not quite ready to commit. And that can be for lots of reasons. It can be because of fear, fear about what people might say, or about what impact it might have on our lives. It can be because we feel like we lack assurance. We think, you know, I don't have what other people have. I just don't have this kind of clear confirmation. I'm waiting for something to happen, so that I would know that I really am here in this section.

Sometimes it's because you feel like you don't know enough, or it's because you feel like you aren't good enough, or because you're worried that you're going to stuff up further down the line. The Gospel penetrated the hearts of these people, but they couldn't bring themselves to confess it openly.

[28 : 20] Instead they wanted to stay in the middle ground. And there's a lot of people in Carlyway who are right there.

They want to be in that middle ground. People who I know do believe, but they're scared to confess. And that can be true, you know, that can be true of us as people who are members of the church, and people who are not yet members of the church. And many of you believe, but are nervous of taking that step.

And, but even for those of us who are members of the church, we've taken that step, but we still want to kind of live a kind of compartmentalized life, where we don't really want a relationship with Jesus to affect our work, or our social life.

You know, we just want to keep it all in separate categories, and we're spending a lot of time worried about what people think. The middle ground feels so much easier, doesn't it?

[29 : 24] It feels safe. It feels like we're being careful. It feels better.

But it's not better. And the reason why it's not better is because it doesn't exist.

The gospel gives us darkness or light. And we're either here where we need to cry out to Jesus to save us.

We need to take that one step that we spoke about earlier. Or, and I think for many people, this is what I'm talking to, you actually are here in His light.

You just don't realize it. You just need to realize what you already are. And when the light of the gospel shines into our hearts, it doesn't make us perfect people.

[30 : 39] It doesn't mean that we understand everything. It doesn't mean that all our lives are sorted. It just means that we are ready to follow Him. And you might be sitting there thinking, how do I know? How do I know if I'm here?

How do I know if I'm here? Well, there's lots of ways you can know, but I think there's one crucial way that you can know. One of the clearest ways of knowing that the gospel has penetrated your hearts is to ask yourself this.

Do I know that this is more important than anything else? And if you know that, then the gospel has penetrated your heart.

Jesus is at work. He's calling you to follow Him. And as we follow Him, we're always battling against sin.

And there's a sense in which our lives right now are a mixture of darkness and light. You know, we've got the light of the gospel, we're still tempted by darkness, we're still making stupid mistakes, we're still fighting against our own mistakes, and we're kind of battling along.

[31 : 50] And there's a sense in which our lives are a mixture of God's kingdom renewing us, the kingdom of darkness still harassing us. There's a mixture in that sense.

And ultimately, the destiny is either light or darkness, heaven or hell. Just now, our lives are either an evening or a dawn.

An evening and a dawn look the same because they're both, there's darkness and light battling. But an evening is heading towards darkness.

A dawn is heading towards light. That's where Jesus puts us. And it's so, so important that we all just stop and think about this.

The last thing I want to say is this. When we look at these authorities, the problem was not what they believed because they believed in Him.

[33 : 04] There was two problems that they faced. Their problem was what they were afraid of, and their problem was what they loved.

They were afraid of what people might say, and they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. Now, I've done both of those things in my life many times. I've been far too afraid of what people think, and I've loved the glory that comes from people. And maybe some people here are stressing about what they believe.

They think, do I really believe? Do I really believe? Do I really believe? Do I really believe? You do. I know you do.

But maybe you're worrying about the wrong things. Maybe you're even loving the wrong things. Now, that's not to say that the Gospel is calling us to stop loving the things that we should love.

[34 : 09] The Gospel never does that. The Gospel is never saying abandon your wife or your children or your hobbies. It's not saying any of that. Actually, the Gospel makes us love these things more.

We can love our work and our families and our hobbies in our community in a new and fresh way, but in a more meaningful way when we put Jesus first in our lives.

But the key thing that we have to do is we make sure that we're ready to follow Him, to believe in Him, and to follow Him.

Not to worry about what people will think. Not to worry what might or might not happen.

And in all of this, God is calling us to openly, publicly, humbly follow Jesus.

[35 : 14] That's what He's calling us all to do. And there's two reasons why this has got to happen. There's a secondary reason and a primary reason. The secondary reason is we desperately need this as a church.

There's just no getting away from it. We desperately need this as a church. We need people to come and hear about Jesus.

We need people to follow Jesus. We need people to profess faith in Jesus and become members. We need this to happen if there is going to be a church in Carlyway. If this does not happen, there will not be a church in Carlyway in 20 years' time.

It's not going to be there. So we need another generation. We need another generation. And I look at the key people who serve in our church today.

Most of them 20 years ago weren't members of the church. And so we need the key people for 20 years' time, for 10 years' time, for 5 years' time, to become members of the church, to serve.

[36 : 23] It's got to happen for our church to exist. So we desperately need people to be ready to take this step. And we want to support and help you to do that.

You don't need to wait until the next communion. We don't really do that anymore. You can become a member at any time during the year. You just need to tell me and we would talk to you and we'd meet with the elders. We're not there to scrutinize you or anything like that.

But we just need this to happen. And we long for it to happen. But that's the secondary reason. The primary reason is this.

If you look at verse 43, there's our crucial point that I want to highlight. And I want to highlight what it doesn't say. It doesn't actually say that these people love people more than they love God.

It's easy to think, oh, they love people more than they love God. It doesn't actually say that. It says they loved what people could give them more than what God could give them.

[37 : 20] You see that? Because it's all in the language of glory that comes from man, more than the glory that comes from God. So you see the crucial point there? They love what people could give them more than what God could give them.

And that means that God is not saying, you need to love me more than you love other people. Sort yourself out, come out of the middle ground, and get your house in order.

God's not saying that. God is saying, I will love you in a way that nothing else can.

And I will bless you in a way that nothing else can. And I will fill your life with joy and peace like nothing else can.

So come out of the middle ground. Amen.