

JUST GIVE ME JESUS

SERIES: THE UPPER ROOM DISCOURSE

By Danny Hall

We're beginning a series of messages on the Upper Room Discourse in the Gospel of John. This is Jesus' final teaching to his disciples, delivered to them in the upper room where they observed the Passover meal together on the eve of his trial and crucifixion. It is profound and wonderful teaching.

When I was considering and praying about what to preach, I was in the middle of an email Bible study on the Upper Room Discourse with an old friend named Dave who lives in Nashville, Tennessee. As we studied the richness and beauty of this text, I began to see afresh that Jesus is giving incredible pictures to his disciples of the beauty of what New-Covenant living is all about.

At PBC "New Covenant" is one of the terms we use to talk about our life of faith. New-Covenant living is the wonderful, liberated experience of God's grace whereby we know God personally through Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of God lives within us. The law of God is written on our hearts, and the Spirit guides, leads, empowers, and gives us intimacy with God that is beyond imagination. The New Covenant is about all of the resources, wonders, and beauty of what God has given us. One of the passages that we often turn to, to talk about the New Covenant, is 2 Corinthians 3-6, where Paul lays out this theology.

In the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus is not only giving his disciples pictures of New-Covenant living, but he is also challenging them about what it means to be spiritual leaders. He is preparing them for two new realities that they are about to face: he's not going to be there any longer, and they're going to be in charge. He knows that they're going to feel scared, inadequate, and overwhelmed, so in these final words he summarizes all that he has been trying to demonstrate for them as they walked together for more than three years. All that time he has been investing in this band of men, preparing them to be the new leaders of this movement he is building that we now call the church and the kingdom of God.

Now they have come to the eve when he will leave them, but it is clear that they are not ready. They have come to believe, rightly, that Jesus is the promised Messiah. They have given up their homes and their occupations to follow him and be trained by him. But they are still informed by their own Jewish perspective on Messiah, and they are absolutely sure that Jesus is about to take his place as the king of Israel, based on the prophecies of the reigning Messiah. So they are thinking, "We're on the inside now. We're about to go from the bottom of the heap as fishermen and tax collectors, to the inner circle of the King himself!"

Jesus knows that their understanding of the kingdom is wrong. Their view of the kingdom of the Messiah is limited to a strip of land in Palestine. He wants to lift their eyes beyond that to see that the kingdom of God is a universal, spiritual kingdom. He is indeed Messiah and King, but he is a king of far more than they've ever dreamed of! Furthermore, the call for them to follow him and be leaders in that kingdom will cost them in ways they have never thought about before. So he knows they have to be prepared.

The teaching part of the Upper Room Discourse is in John 14, 15, and 16. On either side of that are two "bookends." Chapter 13 is the beautiful story of Jesus' preparing for the Passover meal and washing the disciples' feet. We are going to be studying chapter 13 in the next three messages. Chapter 17 is a wonderful prayer in which Jesus pours out his heart for the disciples and those who will follow. So in chapter 13 Jesus demonstrates for the disciples what kingdom leadership looks like and hopes that they will get it. In chapters 14-16 he teaches them about kingdom leadership and hopes they will get it. Then in chapter 17 he prays for them passionately, because he knows they don't get it!

The gospel of John basically falls into two sections. In the first twelve chapters John tells the story of Jesus. He

tells it primarily through teaching, miracles, and other events in Jesus' life that attest to who Jesus is: the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Messiah and Savior of the world. From chapter 13 to the end of the book, John focuses down to the last few days: this evening when Jesus teaches his disciples, the following day of trial and crucifixion, and the resurrection--the final great work of God in Christ, "reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

At the end of chapter 12 is a wonderful summary of all that John has talked about up to that point. In two insightful paragraphs he lays out for us the picture of the response that Jesus has received as he has gone about teaching and living, and then, through the words of Jesus, the call to see the essential importance of who he is. Before we begin our study of the Upper Room Discourse in chapters 13-17, we're going to look at this summary. It's a transition from the first section of the book to the Upper Room Discourse. We'll again be reminded of who Jesus is and what is at stake as we consider his offer of salvation to us. John 12:37-50:

But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him; that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled which he spoke, "Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" For this cause they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, "He has blinded their eyes and He hardened their heart; lest they see with their eyes, and perceive with their heart, and be converted, and I heal them." These things Isaiah said, because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him. Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

And Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in Me does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me. And he who beholds Me beholds the One who sent Me. I have come as light into the world, that everyone who believes in Me may not remain in darkness. And if anyone hears My sayings, and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day. For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me."

Not believing in Jesus

John begins by saying that he did all kinds of miracles. At the end of his gospel John writes, "Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book..." (John 20:30). That is, the signs John has recorded are here for the purpose of showing us who Jesus is. "But these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). What John is saying to us is that Jesus lived his life to be observed. He was not only teaching them, but through the power of the miracles that he did, through the compassion that he showed for the downtrodden, the hurt, the sick, bringing life and healing and promise to those in need, he was demonstrating who he was.

Yet in spite of all that Jesus did, John says, "they were not believing in Him..." The way he puts it indicates an ongoing choosing not to believe. Confronted by the words and actions of Jesus, which called them to consider who he was, most of those around him chose to continually refuse to believe that he was who he was demonstrating himself to be.

Now why was that? John makes two observations about this rejection of Jesus. First, he draws our attention to the binding and blinding power of mankind's resistance to God. He is portraying a cycle that people get into when they refuse to consider who Jesus is; that is, the very nature of rejecting the message of Christ is self-reinforcing. John points out that this is the predicted response. He quotes Isaiah 53:1: "Lord, who has believed

our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” That was Isaiah’s introduction to a wonderful portrait of the suffering Servant, a prophecy about Messiah as the One who would carry the sins of his people. Yet even in the introduction Isaiah said, “Who is going to believe this?” He knew that there was going to be a negative reaction to it, because it is natural for mankind to reject the penetrating power of the message of redemption and freedom from sin. John sees the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in his day. The prophecy anticipated that, confronted by Jesus, people would not believe, and right down to our day that has remained true. There is a settled resistance to God, if you will, that becomes self-reinforcing, with binding and blinding power.

John’s second observation is that this resistance is driven by two powerful factors. The first is pride. He quotes Isaiah 6:10: “He has blinded their eyes, and He hardened their heart.” This is part of the message that God gave Isaiah to give to the nation. He said, “Israel, you have chosen to stand against my revelation, to disobey my voice, to not hear the message of my covenant with you. So I am going to give you up to be what you want to be, rather than continue to woo you to me. If you want to be stubborn and prideful and resistant, that’s what you’ll get. Your heart will be hardened.” When God “gives people over” to follow their natural inclinations (Romans 1), there is a settled rebellion that comes, a hardness of heart that is indicative of pride. One of the most challenging aspects of the gospel message is that all we have to do to be forgiven is to admit that we are incomplete, that we need God’s grace and forgiveness. That act of absolute humility before God is somehow so difficult for us! We want to hold on to a sense of self-righteousness. “I’m really not that bad. I can chart my own way, balance my life, figure it all out for myself.”

The second powerful factor in resistance to the gospel is fear. Even some of the rulers of the synagogue who have heard Jesus teach and have seen him perform miracles, have begun to believe that he may be the Messiah. But the Pharisees and the leaders of their religious culture have threatened to put anyone out of the synagogue, excommunicate them, and ostracize them if they follow this Jesus. So they are intimidated, fearful to follow him because of what it will cost them. John realizes that this fear is so strong in many people that it keeps them from following Jesus.

That’s true in our own day. How many people have you known who walked right up to really giving their lives to Christ and following him fully, but didn’t? There was that nagging fear of what would happen to them, what their family and friends would think, what it would cost them in terms of their job. They didn’t want to pay that price, so they cowered before the intimidation of their world, their religious system, their culture, or whatever, and backed away.

So out of pride and fear, some who have seen and heard the message of Jesus will not believe in it. In summing up these first three years of Jesus’ ministry, I would say, as I think John does, that this is where most people are.

But John doesn’t leave us there. In the final paragraph of this summary and transition he recapitulates the great themes of his gospel that he has been teaching us concerning the person of Jesus. He does so by quoting Jesus’ own words about himself. These words reveal to us what is at stake in who Jesus is. If there was binding and blinding power in mankind’s resistance to God, there is liberating power in the revelation of who Jesus is.

The revelation of who Jesus is

There are two aspects of this revelation. First, John talks about how God demonstrates himself to us. Second, he says that God explains to us how to understand and know him. So in the life of Jesus as the demonstration of who God is, and in the words of Jesus as the explanation of who he is, we have a full revelation of all that is at stake.

Let’s look more closely at the aspect of God’s demonstrating himself to us. Notice verse 44: “And Jesus cried out and said, ‘He who believes in Me does not believe in Me, but in Him who sent Me. And he who beholds Me beholds the One who sent Me.’” This is critical in understanding who Jesus is. The way mankind would like to regard Jesus is merely as a great teacher, a wonderful religious leader, perhaps the ultimate example of what it

means to be devoted to God. But Jesus doesn't allow that easy way out. He says, "If you believe in me, you are not merely believing in some great teacher or great sacrificial saint. No, you are believing in the One who sent me, because when you see me you are seeing God." Jesus is explaining that he is the incarnate Son of God who has come to reveal God fully to us.

Jesus, the revealer of God, is the dispeller of darkness. Verse 46: "I have come as light into the world, that everyone who believes in Me may not remain in darkness." Light is a powerful metaphor in the writings of John. In this gospel John uses the metaphor of light to talk about Jesus more than fifteen times. Darkness is a powerful metaphor for confusion and misunderstanding. Picture yourself in a totally dark environment, bumbling around trying to figure out which way to go. That is the picture of what happens to us apart from Christ. This darkness is multifaceted. It is moral darkness or sinfulness; that is, confusion about what it means to live rightly, about what holiness is, since mankind is led by the dictates of its own lust, passions, and frailties. It is an intellectual darkness as mankind tries to understand the reality of the world, the nature of God, and the nature of life. It is emotional darkness as people are thrown to and fro in turmoil, trying to figure out who they are and what life is all about. They grab hold of anything that will make them feel good for the moment, hoping that they can find some sort of emotional satisfaction. It is relational darkness. They hope to find fulfillment in relationships with other people, but those relationships are fractured and hurtful and never seem to fully satisfy.

Into this multifaceted confusion and darkness the light of Jesus shines: "Here is truth. Here is God, fully revealed to you." The revealed God himself says, "See me in all my glory, for I will lead you out of the darkness."

Now let's look at the second aspect of the revelation of who Jesus is: in the words of Jesus, God tells us how to understand and know him. In verse 49 he says, "For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me." Jesus wants us to understand that God is the author of the message, lest we once again reduce the teachings of Jesus to a lofty ethic for human living. He is speaking the very words of God to us that we need to hear and obey.

He says in verses 47-48, "And if anyone hears My sayings, and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day." Now what does that mean? In John 6:26-29 there is a wonderful interaction that gives us insight into what Jesus is saying here. Shortly after he fed the multitude, Jesus had this encounter with those who were seeking him:

"Jesus answered them and said, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you, for on Him the Father, even God, has set His seal.' They said therefore to Him, 'What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.'"

To obey the words of Christ, to understand the revelation of God and to respond to it, is to believe in him, to cast ourselves completely in faith upon the only One who can meet the deepest needs of our heart, forgive our sins, and shine light into the darkness of our confusion, to fully trust and submit ourselves to him as our Lord and Savior.

Now if we were to ask one another, "What are the works of God?" without considering what Jesus has said here, almost always we would all pull out some sort of list. I'm sure they had one in that day: "Go to synagogue, pay my tithe, follow the law--these are the works of God." That's what they had grown up hearing. We too have our list. "The works of God? Well, to be a really good person, to be in church on Sunday, to give to the poor..." Our list may be long and glowing and noble. But Jesus' message cuts through all of that and says, "No, the work of God is to trust in me." The grace of God brings us face to face with him and all of his holiness and glory, and makes us recognize that all those little dos and don'ts cannot in any measure stack up

against the power of the sin in our lives. Only the transforming grace of Jesus can do that, and it sets us free to obey God, to live for him, to do the things he wants us to do. It doesn't start with a list, it starts with belief. Jesus is calling us here to break through the myopia of our own religious culture, the narrowness of our own view of what it means to be a good person, to see through to our need of Christ and trust him.

I grew up in the Bible belt in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. It was a highly religious Christian culture. I was in church when I was in diapers, and I never quit going to church, because that's what my parents did. We were a good Baptist church, which meant we had forty meetings a week, at least, I think! My childhood recollection is of going to church all the time. I knew all the Bible stories and did all the things that every good little Baptist boy ought to do. But by the time I was in high school, I was manufacturing my own religion around that culture, picking out the parts I liked from the parts I didn't like. I made sure I put on a good front and went to church on Sunday to please my parents, but on the side I was living a separate life filled with all kinds of fun things that I wanted to do. I thought I could have it both ways.

I'm afraid that's the way many of us arrange our religious life. We carve out for ourselves some religious activity or orientation that gives us a sense that we are meeting that need we feel to be connected to God. But the thought of really giving our life to God is so overwhelming, because of the pride and fear that I talked about earlier, that we become comfortable in some religious culture instead. It can have the name "Christian" on it, or "PBC." We follow that, and all the while we are reserving for ourselves the right to live as we please. The problem is, that is just more darkness and confusion. We wonder why we're still spiritually impotent, frustrated. The only solution is to allow the gospel of Christ to break through that narrowness of vision and allow us to see the glory of his salvation.

That's what happened to me when I was an arrogant, cocky eighteen-year-old about to go off to college. I was proud of the way I had made a mockery of my church. But right in the middle of that, God brought me into a situation in which he humbled me before some of the very people on whom I had heaped the most derision. Their passionate love for Christ broke through my stubbornness and pride, and humbled me before God until I was willing to allow my religious world to be shattered so that he could get to the core of my heart with the wonderful message of his forgiveness and love for me.

That's what Jesus is crying out to us here.

Eternal life

Notice verses 49b-50a: "The Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life..." I love the phrase "eternal life." It is a New-Testament term, and almost all of the instances of its use are in the writings of John. John uses the phrase "eternal life" more than thirty times, and never does he use it to talk about something that happens after we die. John always talks about eternal life as something that is the present possession of the ones who are believing in Jesus. Eternal life, in the words of Jesus, is a description of a *kind* of life, which has the eternal quality of connection with God himself. It ushers us out of the whole rat race of mundane religiosity, and into the very presence of the living God himself. It offers us personal relationship with him and community with those who likewise walk in faith with him. It is something far greater and more wonderful than merely getting our dos and don'ts list in line morally. It has to do with breaking through to knowing and experiencing God himself.

This is the picture John paints for us in this wonderful summary of what the gospel is all about and what is at stake. Confronting pride and fear, Christ offers to us a breaking out of the darkness into the light, out of the confusion and distance from God into intimacy and personal fellowship with him.

I want to suggest some applications. What are we going to do with Jesus? For those of us who are believers in Jesus Christ, who have been through that wonderful cleansing and forgiveness by God's grace, the message to us today is this: reinstate Jesus as the central focus of our lives. One day not long ago our singles pastor, Scott Grant, said something profound to me: "I have one more day to love Jesus and to advance his kingdom. That's

all I know ultimately.” As believers in Jesus Christ, where are we focusing now? If we hear the call of God to be spiritual leaders, it starts here, by refocusing on Christ as the central issue of our lives. It starts by believing day by day that God has given us one more day to love Jesus and to advance his kingdom. That requires us to make it a priority to spend time in his word, in fellowship with him, and together with others who seek him. We have to be willing to go out into our communities and proclaim Jesus, not by trying to win arguments about whose religion is the best, but by showing the glory of who Jesus is in our life and words, demonstrating the transforming love and grace of God, and pointing people to Jesus as the one who can bring salvation and touch the deepest needs of their life.

For those who have never had the opportunity to trust Christ as their personal Savior, God’s word of application is very simple: Accept his wonderful gift of salvation. You don’t have to have everything all figured out at this moment. You just need to recognize that you need the forgiving, gracious hand of Christ in your life.

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