

Grace Notes

Number 81

Jesus Does Not Trust Some Believers – John 2:23-25

²³ Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. ²⁴ But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, ²⁵ and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.

Most Bible commentators interpret this passage to say that these people at the Passover did not really believe in Jesus for salvation, therefore Jesus did not commit Himself to them because He knew the unbelieving condition of their hearts. Their faith was defective or insufficient for salvation because it was based only on the signs that Jesus performed and/or they believed only in His name, not His person.

What John affirms

John says these people “believed in His name.” Anyone who thinks that this does not refer to salvation contradicts John and his consistent record that those who believe have eternal life (e.g. John 3:15-16, 36; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 11:25-26; 20:31). To contradict the testimony of any author of Scripture places an enormous burden of proof on the interpreter. Yet the text has no explicit proof or statement that these did not believe unto salvation. That conclusion is often a product of the theology that teaches true faith must include a full commitment to Jesus as Lord and Master of one’s life.

Some claim that these “false believers” only believed “In His name” and not the person of Jesus, which is not enough to save. Two observations dismiss that argument. First, in the Bible one’s name represents that person’s character and all that he or she is. To believe in Jesus’ name is to believe His and others’ claims that He is the Son of God, the Savior, and the Messiah (the Christ). So to believe in Jesus’ name is to believe in Him as the Savior. Second, John’s Gospel encourages belief in Jesus’ name and shows that it results in salvation (John 1:12, 3:18; 20:31).

Another attempt to label these people as “false believers” argues that they only believed in Jesus because of the signs He did, not His personal claims. But there is nothing wrong with signs that lead people to faith in Christ. First, we note that the text does not say they believed in signs, but His “name,” that is, His person. Second, the Gospel of John expects signs to prompt faith (John 4:48; 12:37), which is precisely how and why John uses signs in his gospel according to his purpose statement for the book in 20:31: “but these [signs] are 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 also demonstrates this by examples of faith prompted by signs (John 1:47-49; 2: 11; 4:52-54; 10:41-42; 11:42-45; 20:26-29). Third, Jesus Himself encourages faith that is based on signs (John 1: 50-51; 10:37-38; 14:11). God uses signs just as he uses prophecy and proclamation to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ.

What Jesus knows

Jesus’ claim to know what is in a person in verse 25 is demonstrated by the stories that follow this passage. In chapter 3, Jesus knows the question and heart’s desire of Nicodemus when He answers the question that Nicodemus is never allowed to ask. Jesus knows that Nicodemus needs a new birth. Jesus also demonstrates His omniscience in chapter 4 with the Samaritan woman when He tells her about her relationships with various men. She is surprised to hear His knowledge and thinks He must be a prophet, but eventually is convinced He is the Messiah (John 4:29, 39-42). Also, in chapter 6, Jesus knows the motive of the crowd that follows Him across the Sea of Galilee. He tells them they follow only because of the food He gave them. He knows they need eternal life

and tells them so (John 6:26-27). He again demonstrates His omniscience by declaring He knows that most of the crowd does not believe in Him (John 6:64), and of His disciples who remain with him, He knows one is an unbeliever (John 6:66). The omniscient Lord Jesus knows who are believers and who are unbelievers. He even knows the unspoken motives of people's hearts. It should be no surprise that Jesus knows the hearts of those who believe in Him in 2:24. They are believers In Christ as Savior as John unequivocally affirms, but their hearts were not yet fully committed to Christ as their Lord.

What the Bible shows

In John, as in the rest of the New Testament, *believe* means to be convinced or persuaded that something is true or trustworthy. Never is *believe* or *faith* modified by words about the reality of that faith, such as *really* believe, *sincerely* believe, *true* faith, *spurious* faith, *false* faith, or *temporary* faith. To believe or have faith always means the conviction or assurance that something is true. Though the object of faith may change or fail, it does not mean that one's faith in that object has failed.

When one believes in Jesus Christ as Savior, that person receives eternal salvation, as John's record demonstrates. Those who claim there are examples of false faith or faith insufficient for salvation are more influenced by their theological system than by the clear statements of Scripture.

John himself shows that new believers are sometimes not fully committed to Jesus. To those new believers in John 8:31, Jesus challenges them to become true disciples (followers, learners) by abiding (remaining in, adhering to) His Word. Also, with both Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, John illustrates the growth of their faith from private conversations to public identification with Christ. In John 12:42, those who believed were not committed enough to confess their faith because they feared the Pharisees.

What Jesus promises

The simple truth behind John 2:23-25 is that the more we commit ourselves to Jesus, the more He is willing to commit Himself to us. The message of the Upper Room Discourse in John 13-17 is that an intimate, abiding, and obedient relationship with Jesus bears spiritual fruit and shows we are true disciples. John 14:21 says it best: "He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him." Of course, God and His Son love and have revealed themselves to everyone. But in this private discourse to his eleven disciples, Jesus promises that loving and obedient believers can enjoy a more intimate familial love and manifestation of His character. These are rewards for the committed believer, the true disciple, but probably not for the new believer. The new believer must learn what the Lord teaches so that he can learn to obey from the heart as a response to grace. Those who respond well to truth receive more truth as Jesus' "friends" (see also John 15:14-15).

Conclusion

If those who John says believed did not receive eternal life, then we must conclude that we cannot trust John's testimony and Jesus' promises. We must also conclude that they must *really* believe to *really* be saved. But what does that mean and how would we know? John and Jesus can be trusted: those who believe in Jesus Christ have eternal life. Knowing this, we discover a deeper truth, that some who believe and are saved are not ready for Jesus to commit Himself to them in a deeper intimate relationship. But on the other hand, those who love and obey Him can enjoy a deeper manifestation of His love and presence. We believe to obtain eternal life; we obey to experience that life fully.