

Churches Rejecting Jesus **John 2:13-3:21**

This morning we are going to continue to look at some of the things that happened at the very beginning of Jesus' three years of ministry. Last week we saw him gather his first disciples and perform his first miracle at the wedding in Cana. Today we are going to look at his initial trip to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Normally we'll be studying from the book of Luke but for a few weeks we'll be in John because he's the only one who records these things.

Jerusalem was the global center for the worship of God, so you would think that things would go really well for Jesus there – you would think that he'd be on the same page as the religious leaders and they'd be eager to work with him to accomplish his mission. They had the Law and the Prophets, they had the Temple and the Priests, everything about their worship was supposed to prepare them for Jesus. They were the experts. So you would think that when Jesus showed up, they'd already be doing things right and be poised and ready to eagerly embrace him.

And you'd think the same thing about the church in America today. If Jesus showed up to lead us, you'd think he'd find us all eager and ready to follow. We're the global leader when it comes to Christianity. We're supposed to be the experts. We have more churches than you can imagine, more seminaries and Bibles and resources than anywhere in the world. We should be so in tune with Jesus and his teaching and way of life that if he were to show up here there would be a seamless transition to his leadership. There shouldn't be any major changes or conflict.

That's the way it should be, but I'm afraid that's not the way it would be. In fact, if Jesus was to show up to lead the American church today, I think a lot of churches would reject him and kick him out the door. I think he would require such major change that he would be very unwelcome.

As we look at Jesus' initial visit to Jerusalem today, we're going to see immediate conflict between him and the religious leaders. We're going to see that even though they should have been poised and ready to embrace him and his teaching, they were so far off that they were actually in opposition to him and didn't

understand his teaching. And I want us to see it as a wake up call for the church in America and ask ourselves what kind of reception would Jesus receive if he arrived here at East Lincoln? Are we actually following him and his way of life? Or have we veered away like so many churches?

There were three incidents that happened during Jesus' initial trip to in Jerusalem that reveal how far off they had become in their understanding of God's will and what God was doing. The first happened right away in the temple courts.

Now if you remember from our study of the book of Exodus, the courtyard of the temple, or tabernacle, as it was originally, had some very important purposes in order to draw people near to God in worship. First of all, it created a perimeter that surrounded the temple itself and separated the people from the hubbub and noise of everyday life. It was an area that was dedicated to sacrifices and ceremonial washings. At the entrance of the courtyard was the bronze altar where people would offer sacrifices and burnt offerings to the Lord. Further in was the bronze basin filled with water for the priests to wash before ministering to the people or inside the temple. Both of these were to point people to Jesus and his cleansing power and atoning sacrifice that could reconcile people to God. The courtyard was sacred space, set apart for a purpose and the only place on earth for it. But that's not what Jesus found when he entered Jerusalem.

Read John 2:13-22.

The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. ¹⁵ And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade." ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

¹⁸ So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²² When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples

remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

What was happening in the temple courtyard was dishonoring to the temple and to God. It was a huge downgrade from what it was supposed to be. Instead of a space devoted to worship, sacrifice, purification and preparation, it had been turned into a concessions area at a sports complex, only people were buying and selling overpriced animals for sacrifice instead of hotdogs and pretzels. So it was loud and dirty and crowded – nothing like it was supposed to be. In fact it prevented people from experiencing what they were meant to experience when they came to the temple for worship or to draw near to God. And the religious leaders were totally fine with it.

Jesus was not. Jesus was very angry at what he saw, so he drove the merchants and moneychangers and animals out of there. He turned over tables, emptied containers and disrupted everything. He was cleansing his Father's house. So this was the first indication that something was seriously wrong with the religion in Jerusalem and that Jesus and the religious leaders were not on the same page.

That became even more clear in the aftermath when they confronted Jesus and demanded some kind of sign to prove he had the authority to do what he did. There wasn't humility and brokenness and the admission that he was right and they should have known better. Just the demand for a sign. Jesus told them *"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."* He told them exactly what God was going to do in his death and resurrection and they had no idea. They thought he was literally talking about destroying the temple and they took offense. Three years later when they were trying to put Jesus to death they brought up that very statement to try to condemn him.

So things didn't start well in Jerusalem. In fact they revealed that God's will and the way that Jesus was going was so different than the established religion it was unrecognizable. The next incident was with the general population.

Read John 2:23-25.

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus on his part did not

entrust himself to them, because he knew all people²⁵ and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

R.V.G Tasker, in the Tyndale Commentary Series says, *“We may surmise that he regarded all belief in him as superficial which does not have as its most essential elements the consciousness of the need for forgiveness and the conviction that he alone is the Mediator of that forgiveness.”* In other words, the people believed in him because he performed signs, but they had no idea who he really was or why he had come, and Jesus knew how quickly they could turn against him when they found out, which is exactly what they did three years later.

So the people weren't prepared for the true Messiah. Their teachers hadn't prepared them to receive the real Jesus. They were looking for a much different kind of Savior. And when Jesus didn't become what they thought he should be, they ended up rejecting him.

So there was a problem with the spiritual leadership and that in turn created a problem with the rest of the people. There's one more incident that shows us how far off things were in Jerusalem. It involves a conversation Jesus had with one of their top religious leaders.

Read John 3:1-8.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”³ Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”⁴ Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”⁵ Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

So in the first part of the conversation, you can tell that Jesus is telling Nicodemus some things about the kingdom of God that were totally foreign to him. He was

curious about who Jesus was and what he was doing, but Jesus told him the only way he or anyone else could understand those things was if they were born again – that’s the only way anyone could see and enter the kingdom of God. And Nicodemus had no idea what he was talking about. He was supposed to be a leading expert when it came to the things of God, yet he didn’t understand what Jesus was talking about. The conversation continued...

Read John 3:9-15.

Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.¹² If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

So clearly, Nicodemus had no idea what was happening in the kingdom of God. Jesus had apparently been speaking about and bearing witness to what God was doing on earth, but Nicodemus did not receive his testimony. He didn’t believe what Jesus was saying about what was happening on earth and so Jesus knew he wouldn’t believe if he told him about heavenly things. And Nicodemus was one of the religious experts. He was so far off from what God was doing that he couldn’t understand who Jesus was or what was happening.

Nevertheless, Jesus began to tell him who he was and what God was doing. He told him that the Son of Man had come down from heaven and had to be lifted up, like Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness. He must be lifted up so that whoever believes in him might have eternal life. He continued to explain in the next several verses.

Read John 3:16-21.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of

God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

This was Jesus' description of what was happening in the kingdom of God – the truth about who he was and what God was doing through him. God had sent him to save the world. Whoever believed in him would not perish but have everlasting life.

It doesn't say how Nicodemus responded, but I do believe this was the first time he heard these things. Even though he was a religious leader and would have been well-versed in the Holy Scriptures, he had been so far off he had no idea who Jesus was or what he was going to do.

It's really surprising that things were so far off in Jerusalem that when Jesus showed up there wasn't an eager welcome, but there was opposition and confusion right from the very start. It's hard to understand how they could have been so far off. But unfortunately that's the same thing I see happening in many of the churches in America. I've spent quite a bit of time looking into the things that are happening in American churches and I'm convinced that if Jesus were to show up, he would be unrecognizable and rejected by many of them. He's the one who started the church in the first place. He's the one that gave us his teachings and told us what to do. We're supposed to be the experts. And yet, he'd be kicked right out the door in many of today's churches.

There are couple of movements happening in the church today that concern me because I think they're both veering further and further away from the true Jesus, and they both seem to be gaining momentum among different groups of Christians because of their political affiliations.

One is being referred to as "Progressive Christianity" and seems to be the newest wave of liberalism in the church. I see this gaining ground in many of the mainline denominations who have rejected the inerrancy and authority of the Bible and elevated human reasoning and understanding in its place. They are redefining

God, redefining sin, redefining love, salvation, marriage, human sexuality and more. There are many articles being written about it – Decision Magazine has a recent issue that highlights it – and I have appreciated the research and writing done by Alisa Childers as a good place to start. This false Christianity is becoming very prominent and leading many astray, and appeals especially to those who tend to vote for Democrats. They claim to know and love Jesus and yet I believe they would flat out reject him if he actually showed up.

The other movement that concerns me has been referred to as “Christian Nationalism” and seems to be readily embraced by many conservative Christians in evangelical, Pentecostal, and fundamental denominations more like ours. According to an article in Christianity Today, *“Christian nationalism is the belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way. Popularly, Christian nationalists assert that America is and must remain a “Christian nation”—not merely as an observation about American history, but as a prescriptive program for what America must continue to be in the future. Scholars have made a similar argument: that America is defined by its “Anglo-Protestant” past and that we will lose our identity and our freedom if we do not preserve our cultural inheritance.”* This movement is more appealing and harder to see by people in churches more like ours. It is more prominent among those who vote Republican and I believe it will lead Christians down a path where they too would reject Christ if he were to show up.

These aren’t the only two. There’s the Bethel Church movement from Redding, CA that’s sweeping across the nation, the Prosperity Gospel that’s been around for a while, the hyper-dispensationalists that have won over several families from right here, and many more. Each of these is going down the same path that Jerusalem had taken. Each has veered away from the true Jesus to follow a different path that’s more appealing to them.

How do you know what to look out for? The best way is by knowing the real thing. It’s easy to spot a counterfeit when you’re familiar with the real thing. That doesn’t come by spending all your time reading books and listening to sermons by today’s popular preachers and teachers. That’s usually how people can veer off course. They can be good secondary resources, but our primary instruction must come from spending time with Jesus directly in his Word – studying the Bible,

becoming more and more familiar with who Jesus is and the will of God revealed in Scripture.

Do you spend time actually reading and studying the Bible – whether that's on your own or in a small group? Think about it. I know some of you are into a regular practice of Bible reading and some are using a mobile app. We have daily Bible reading plans in the front lobby and you can find an app on your phone. Consider finding someone else who wants to do the same thing and hold each other accountable. Consider starting or joining a small group to learn with others.

We do not want to become like Jerusalem, with all our resources and be unable to recognize the true Jesus when he comes. We don't want to hear him say, "I never knew you." So let us devote ourselves to knowing Jesus by spending time with him in his Word. Let's be students of Jesus and students of the Word. That's what a disciple is.