

“What You Love & What You Know”
John 12:36-43
May 17, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We return to John chapter twelve this morning.

And we are approaching something of a transition in the Gospel of John.

Many scholars point out that you can make something of a division in John’s Gospel between the first twelve chapters and the last nine. Chapters one through twelve are sometimes referred to as the “Book of Signs” and chapters thirteen through twenty-one are referred to as the “Book of Glory.” The first section focuses on Jesus’s earthly ministry and on seven representative signs. The second section focuses on Jesus’s death and resurrection.

As we come now towards the end of that first section, our next two texts from the Gospel of John reflect back on what we have seen so far in the first twelve chapters.

For our text this morning, the general context is Jesus’s ministry so far, but the immediate context is the passage we looked at last week: verses twenty-seven through the first half of verse thirty-six.

For that reason I’ll begin our reading in verse twenty-seven, though the text we will be focusing on this morning will be John 12:36-43.

With that said, let’s hear now from John chapter twelve, beginning with verse twenty-seven.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

^{12:27} [Jesus said,] “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰ Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³ He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die. ³⁴ So the crowd answered him, “We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” ³⁵ So Jesus said to them, “The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. ³⁶ While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”

[And now our text for this morning:]

When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. ³⁷ Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, ³⁸ so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Lord, who has believed what he heard from us,
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”
³⁹ Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said,
⁴⁰ “He has blinded their eyes
and hardened their heart,
lest they see with their eyes,
and understand with their heart, and turn,
and I would heal them.”

⁴¹ Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him. ⁴² 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 of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, we call to you, and we ask you to save us,
so that we might be your faithful servants, and live in light of your testimonies.
We cry out to you,
and we put our hope in your words.
We come now, together, to your Word,
that we might meditate on your promises.
Hear our prayer now, according to your steadfast love,
according to your justice in your covenant, give us life.
Help us now to root ourselves in you.
Grant this, we ask, for Jesus’s sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:146-151]

Our text this morning comes at the end of Jesus’s ministry, before we begin the events that will lead up to his crucifixion and then his resurrection.

And the theme of our passage is unbelief. And a lot has led us to this theme.

In the passage right before this one – when God the Father speaks audibly – we have a stark contrast of responses. Some hear a voice. Others hear only thunder. And we may find ourselves asking why. Why did some hear a voice and others hear only thunder? What was the difference? What made one person hear one thing and another person hear another thing?

But then, when we get to verse thirty-seven, the Apostle John enlarges the scope of the context. Because this is not the only time this has happened. Jesus has performed many miraculous signs over the course of his ministry that not only display his spiritual power, but that also point to, and reveal in some way, who he is. Jesus has performed many miraculous signs, but still the people do not believe in him – still they fail to know and understand who he is.

The question our text pushes us to is: Why do some believe and others don't?

Or ... if we go even deeper: What determines what we know and how we know it?

What determines *what* we know, and *how* we know it?

As I thought about that question, and as I thought about how that question comes across in our text, I found myself turning to Esther Meek.

Dr. Esther Meek is a Christian philosopher and a professor at Geneva College. Her area of focus is epistemology: the study of how we know what we know. And the focus of her work has been bringing together the work of philosopher Michael Polanyi and the insights of covenant theology.

I was already familiar with Esther Meek's work and thought. I've read her earliest book, I've heard her speak, and discussed her work with others. But in working to approach this passage this week, I picked up and read a small book of hers titled *A Little Manual for Knowing*. It's a great little book, and if you're interested in this topic, I'd highly recommend it. I'll be drawing a number of concepts from it this morning, and so, rather than citing it every time, I'll give you this one up-front citation, and you can feel free to assume that anything I say from here on out that sounds clever has probably come from her.

Meek begins by laying out two theories of knowledge – two theories of *how* we know. One, which she says is dominant in our culture, is “knowledge-as-information.” The other, she calls “loving-to-know” – meaning “loving-in-order-to-know.”

The dominant view of knowledge in our culture, she says, is knowledge-as-information. In this view knowledge is simply a collection of facts, bits of data, pieces of information, and content. And so “knowing” is the process of acquiring those facts and bits of data. And gathering good data leads to good knowledge. It is as simple as that.

But ... Meek argues that in reality it is not as simple as that. She argues instead that fundamental to knowledge is love. She argues that an accurate picture of knowledge – both how we experience the acquiring of knowledge, and how the Bible describes acquiring of knowledge – an accurate picture of knowledge centers on love. Love shapes both *what* we know, and *how* we know.

Our text this morning raises the issue of how people responded to Jesus. Jesus gave many signs to show that he is the Messiah – the Son of God. Some saw it and knew it – they believed. But many others did not see it and know it – they did not believe.

Why that difference?

That's the question we will address and then apply to ourselves this morning, with the help of Esther Meek.

And we'll look at it in two parts. We'll look at it in terms of *what* we know, and we'll look at it in terms of *how* we know it.

First, we'll start with *what* we know. And we'll consider the topic of *what* we know by beginning with the very unbelief we see in our text.

Listen again to verses thirty-seven through forty:

³⁷ Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, ³⁸ so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

“Lord, who has believed what he heard from us,
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”

³⁹ Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said,

⁴⁰ “He has blinded their eyes
and hardened their heart,
lest they see with their eyes,
and understand with their heart, and turn,
and I would heal them.”

Here John describes and explains the unbelief of Jesus's contemporaries. And when we hear it, I think most of us have the impulse of wondering whether or not it's fair. We may have the impulse to sympathize with those who have not believed, and be a little suspicious of God's actions here.

Now ... why is that?

Well, I think one major reason is that we hear these verses through the lens of knowledge-as-information. We *assume* that model of knowledge, and so when we come to this text, the treatment of those who do not believe can seem unfair to us.

Because in that model, if the people do not believe, then it means that they must be missing data. If knowledge is simply having enough information to know what is true, then if someone does not believe, then something must be lacking in the information they have.

And so our first temptation may be to question the sufficiency of Jesus's signs. “Sure,” we might find ourselves thinking, “Jesus did wonderful signs, and they pointed to who he was. But ... were they *really* enough? Did they *really* provide enough information? Did they *really* contain enough data about who Jesus was?”

That is how we may find ourselves responding to verse thirty-seven.

But then our struggle can become even greater when we get to verse forty. There we read the prophet Isaiah's explanation, which John says applies to this situation, that God has blinded the people's eyes and hardened their heart, so that they will not see and understand. And now we might especially struggle with feeling as if God is not being fair.

But this too is rooted in our assumption that knowledge is information. Because if knowledge is information, then this verse means that when the people didn't have enough information to understand, God responded by cutting off the very things they relied on to acquire more information, and then he judged them for not having all the information they needed. When we assume that knowledge is information, then when we come to this text, we find ourselves perplexed, or even a bit indignant.

But then, John tells us that contrary to our assumptions, the fundamental issue here is *not* information. John tells us that at root something else is shaping the knowledge and belief that is so crucial.

And he tells us that in verses forty-two and forty-three. There we read:

⁴²Nevertheless, 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 of the synagogue; ⁴³for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.

John tells us that some of the authorities “believed” in some sense ... but not in a real sense. In other words, they “believed” in the sense that they were aware of the data and its power, but they did not accept that data enough to let it change them or their lives. And the thing that kept them from truly believing was, John tells us, what they loved. “They loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”

Which brings us to our first point: What we truly love determines what we truly know.

Esther Meek points out that – contrary to the knowledge-as-information model which treats human beings as buckets which data is deposited into – when real human beings acquire real knowledge, there is a different process that determines what they know.

And that process usually begins with wonder. They see something and it gets their attention. They see something and they are struck by it; they are fascinated, they have wonder or awe at it. They notice it. They direct their attention to it. And then they begin a process – a pilgrimage – to seek to know more about it.

And what Meek points out is that love is necessary in each step of that process.

There are all sorts of things around us that may warrant our attention. But only some things draw us in. Only some things strike us with wonder or awe. Only some things do we decide to direct our attention to. Only some things do we seek to know more about.

Consider, for example, how people relate to a hobby. If you have a hobby or even just an area of interest – at some point you saw some aspect of it, and it struck interest in you. And you were drawn to it. And that led you on a pilgrimage to learn more. But here's the thing: the same thing that draws you in – the same thing that you love and so have learned – will do nothing for someone else. You can try to tell them about it – whether it's an activity you enjoy, or a sport you follow, or a book or TV series – you can try to talk to others about it, but if they do not love it, then it will do nothing for them. They won't feel wonder when you explain some aspect of it that fills you with awe. They may listen to you politely ... for a while ... but they don't really

want to give it their attention. And so despite how much information you might pour out before them, they won't gain much knowledge. Because they don't love what you love.

Some of you are seeing a variation of this as you teach your children at home right now. You're learning that presenting content in a way your child can understand is only *part* of the task of teaching. Much more of it is *motivating* them to learn. And threats only go so far in that. Really, it is cultivating a love in them – a wonder at the subject matter – that leads to the real learning. And that is not easy to do.

Or consider the different levels of interest people have in other people. Think of the young person who is newly in love. They can go on and on to those around them about their beloved. They can share with others all the things they know about their beloved. They can marvel at every detail about their beloved, and they still want to know more. But the people they talk to aren't as curious to know more. They may already know more than they want to. Because they are not in love with the other person's beloved.

We see the same thing with parents in the cliché of the parent who will not stop talking about their own children. They find things interesting about their kids that no one else does ... and that's okay ... because they love their children in a way that nobody else does.

What we love determines what we know and what we seek to know.

It's true of our interests. It's true of our relationships. And it's also true of God. Our love determines what we know, and what we seek to know.

That is, after all, what John tells us is going on in our text. The people loved the glory they could get from men more than they loved God. And *that* determined what they truly knew. And so, when Jesus performed miraculous signs and mighty works, some weren't struck with wonder. Some didn't feel any awe. We saw that in the response of some of the Pharisees to Jesus's raising of Lazarus, back in chapter eleven. The fact that they were not struck with awe says something about what they most loved. Some did marvel at Jesus's works, but they did not truly turn their attention to him in a meaningful way to see who he was claiming to be. Their lack of attention said something about what they most loved. And still others paid some attention ... but did not embark on a venture to know and to understand who Jesus was. They did not pursue him, they did not follow him, they did not seek more knowledge about him. Their decision not to do so said something about what they most loved.

And God's response to them described in verses thirty-nine and forty reflects a just judgment for their lack of love.

There we read from Isaiah how God blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so that they could not believe. What's going on there?

Well, it is a reminder that one of the most devastating judgments God can carry out on someone is to give them over to what they truly want. And that is what is described here.

In Romans chapter one, the Apostle Paul speaks of those who have been given information about God, but because they do not want God – because they do not love God – they turn from and suppress the information that is set right before them. Their love – or their lack of love – determines what they will know. And God’s judgment on them, Paul says, is to “give them up” to their desires and to “a debased mind.” In other words, God doesn’t impose some alien sentence on them from the outside. The people *want* to turn their hearts away from God. Their twisted love has driven them to turn their attention away from God – they turn their attention away from, and they stop up their ears against, the knowledge of him. And God gives them over to the very thing they embrace. They want ignorance of him, and he gives it to them. They want what will lead to their own destruction ... and he eventually lets them have it. They seek blindness towards God, and he gives it. But the root of their willed blindness is their lack of love. What we love determines what we know.

What does that mean for you?

If you are a non-Christian, then it means that the biggest problem you have is not information. The biggest problem you have is what you love – particularly what you most love.

If you’re listening this morning, and you don’t want to be listening, then you need to recognize that the thing that is shaping what you want to hear is your love. And you need to consider what you most love ... and whether it might be blinding you to what you most need to know ... but maybe don’t want to know.

If you’re a non-Christian and you *want* to be listening, then maybe – just maybe – your interest this morning is a sign of a love being kindled in your heart for the Lord that will lead you to the knowledge of him. If you want to know the Lord, then you need to fan that flame. You need to nurture it. You need to keep exposing it to the Word of God and to prayer.

If you’re a Christian, and you are thinking this morning of a non-Christian whom you long to see come and know the Lord, then this is a reminder that while your role is important, you on your own cannot bring them to faith. You can tell them of who Christ is – and you *should* tell them in the moments that are right. But their biggest problem is what they love ... or what they don’t love. You need to be praying earnestly that the Lord would be turning their love to him.

Because one key implication of all of this is that the initiation of our relationship with God must be a gift. Because only he can turn our love towards him after we have turned it away. When we turn our love away, we put ourselves in a vicious cycle, as our twisted love shapes what we are willing to know, which reinforces our twisted love, which once again shapes what we are willing to know, and so on. It is only God who can turn our love back to him, so that we are struck suddenly with awe at who he is. And awe leads to attention ... which leads to seeking ... which leads to the knowledge of God. *That* is the road to true faith.

And so if you are Christian, this text should humble you. Much smarter people than you have had the claims of Christ presented to them and remained unmoved. Much kinder and much nicer people than you have heard the gospel of Jesus and not been drawn to him. Your faith – your knowledge of God – is a gift, inextricably tied to your love, which was turned to God not by your own efforts, but as a gift from God himself.

If you are a Christian, then your faith is a gift from God.

Love for God is a gift from God ... and what we love determines what we know.

That is the first thing we see in our text this morning.

The second thing we see is that what we love determines *how* we know. What we love determines *how* we know. What do I mean by that?

Well, the second thing we need to see in our text is that it is love that leads to the kind of knowledge and understanding that shapes what we do.

Let me say that again: Love leads to the kind of knowledge and understanding that shapes what we do.

To better explain what I mean we should think again of the two models of knowledge we spoke of early.

The first is the knowledge-as-information approach. This view, more often than not, leads us to see knowledge as a pile of facts that we can then use for our own benefit. Esther Meek points out that this is where we get the phrase “knowledge is power.” Knowledge, in this view, is a set of tools that expands what *you* can do.

But if true knowledge is rooted in love, then that knowledge works differently. If the loving-to-know model is true, then knowledge is not just a pile of tools for us to use for ourselves. Instead true knowledge shapes how we see and how we act. True knowledge lovingly builds a foundation of understanding from which we can see, and from which we can act, in love.

Think, for example, of someone learning the piano. When we think about it, we quickly see that the knowledge-as-bits-of-data model falls short of explaining what is really going on in someone who gains musical knowledge. Someone can know what note each key on the keyboard plays. They can know how to read music. They can even memorize a piece of music in their heads. But that doesn't make them a musician, or even someone who can play an instrument. Real knowledge is more than a pile of data.

Instead they need to build a foundation out of that data and then stand on that foundation. They need to absorb that data deeply into their minds and bodies through practice until they know the keys and the music without even thinking about them. Only then can they put that knowledge to use to play something beautifully.

And the ideal motivator for that is love. Love of music drives their desire to learn it more deeply. Love of their instrument drives their desire to grow more and more familiar with it and skilled with it. And then, when love for the music has built that foundation, it is love for their audience that can drive them to play beautiful music for them, from that foundation of knowledge.

Love leads to a form of knowledge and understanding that shapes what we can do.

The same of course is true of a whole range of skills that we may develop.

And it's true not only of skills that are expressed through physical actions, but even more purely intellectual knowledge that people develop.

The doctor who has gone through thousands of hours of study and practice does not come at a patient with just a pile of facts to pick through as they try to come up with a diagnosis. They have integrated those facts they learned into a foundation for their understanding. They are not picking through a pile of facts as they examine a patient, but they are viewing the patient from the vantage point – the foundation that their knowledge provides them with. It was their love and sacrifice in medical school that built that foundation. And now it is their love that leads them to use that foundation to serve others.

And, as a bit of a side-note, that does lead us to one of the problems we have in our culture right now. Our culture has dueling idolatries when it comes to expertise.

One side equates credentials, or membership in a guild, with this kind of deep knowledge. And, of course, that is not always the case. Some people who get the credentials haven't actually built the foundation of deep knowledge that they need to stand on in order to rightly serve others. Credentials do not necessarily indicate true expertise. And thinking they do is one idolatry in our society.

But the other idolatry is the idolatry of our own knowledge that leads us to despise real experts. This side also fails to recognize the difference between a pile of facts and the deep knowledge of a true expert, and so it despises the expertise of those who have lovingly and sacrificially built such a foundation of knowledge in their understanding.

Think about it in the current pandemic, for example. I can look at all sorts of charts and graphs and data about what is going on right now. But then I talk to an M.D. like Ryan Gross or Paul Darby. And if I listen, I quickly realize that even in looking at the same data, they are seeing things on a level that I am not – in the same way that a skilled musician can look at a musical score and see things that I do not. In both cases we can look at the same thing, but while I do it from the ground, they can do it from a foundation of knowledge built up over years of loving self-sacrifice. And that foundation shapes what they can then do. They can love people – whether with a piano concerto or with an analysis of data – in ways that I could not do without the same foundation.

And the same thing is true in our relationships – in them we can use knowledge in self-serving ways or in lovingly sacrificial ways.

On one end, knowledge about another person can be used as a pile of facts for our own benefit. You can gather a lot of data about someone, but you don't lovingly work that data into a foundation on which to understand them. You don't turn that into knowledge from which you can then love them better.

Maybe you know now a number of things about your spouse, or your child, or a peer, but it doesn't shape your actions. You know their past. You know their hopes and fears. You know what makes them feel loved and what makes them feel insecure. But you don't work through that information and make it into a foundation from which you can understand them. And that reflects a lack of love for them. You don't love them enough to work through what you know and build it into a foundation that helps you see them more clearly and love them more effectively.

The alternative, though, is to lovingly build our knowledge of someone into such a foundation: to think through the data – the facts and stories and shared experiences – and to integrate them into a solid foundation of knowledge of them. And then we can stand on that foundation to see them more clearly, and love them more effectively.

Our love – or lack of it – shapes how we see them, and how we act towards them, because it shapes *the way* we know them.

Our love shapes *how* we know ... and how we know determines how well we can love.

And the same thing is true in our relationship to God.

And that comes out in our text. Commentators point out that one of the objections to Christ that the Apostle John is likely dealing with here is: If Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God, then why did the people of God – the Jews – reject him? [Carson, 447; Köstenberger, 481]

That question would have come from Jews in Jesus's day. It would have come from both Jews and Gentiles in the days of the Apostles. What was the answer?

And part of John's answer is that those who raise this question, and who are supposed to know God and supposed to know the Word of God, don't really know them. They may have compiled data from the Scriptures, but they don't really *know* them.

Because, John says, the Scriptures themselves should have led everyone who knows the word of God to expect that the people of God would reject the Messiah of God.

John first points to Isaiah 53:1, in verse thirty-eight. Here Isaiah speaks of the Suffering Servant of God, and he says that when he comes, he will not be believed.

Next, John points to Isaiah 6:10. Here he reminds them that the prophet Isaiah himself was rejected by the people of God. It has happened before that God sent a messenger to his people, and his people rejected that messenger. And not only once! The passage from Isaiah 6:10 that is cited here seems itself to point back to Deuteronomy twenty-nine, where Moses lamented that Israel had seen all the miracles of the exodus from Egypt and even *still* they had failed to believe. [Köstenberger, 482]

In other words, the Scriptures explained that from the very beginning under Moses, through Isaiah and the period of the prophets, the people of God had again and again rejected the messengers sent from God. And so how could pious first-century Jews, who knew the Scriptures,

look at the Jewish leaders' rejection of Jesus and determine from it that Jesus must not be sent from God?

Anyone who drew such a conclusion may have known information from the Scriptures ... but they didn't really *know* the Scriptures.

They had gathered a pile of data about the Scriptures, which they used in a variety of ways ... but they had not worked the Scriptures into a foundation of understanding in their hearts and minds, from which they viewed what was going on before them.

And so they failed to recognize, as the people of Jerusalem rejected Jesus, that the same thing was happening as had happened again and again when God sent messengers to his people.

They did not love God's Word enough to build it into a foundation of understanding in their hearts.

But John did. John saw. John could view what was happening from the vantage point of Scripture. And so John knew what God was doing, and could respond to it in love and trust.

What about us?

How do you know God? *How* do you know the Scriptures? *How* do you study the truth about God – whether through reading, or through sermons, or devotions, or studying theology or church history?

What is your goal when you come to those things?

Is it to just accumulate a pile of facts that you can use as you like – information about God for your own benefit? That's the kind of knowledge the chief priests and Pharisees had. Is that what you are acquiring?

Or are you building a foundation in your heart from which you can better love God? Are you taking that information about God and making a bedrock of understanding in your heart and mind from which you can *see* the world according to what God has told you? Is your goal to provide in your heart the foundation of a biblical perspective from which you can *act* in love for God?

Does your love for God drive *how* you approach knowledge of God ... and does that knowledge then shape how you view and how you act towards God and his world?

If you are a Christian and you see that you are approaching your knowledge of God in a self-centered way rather than a loving way, then the calling for you this morning is to ask God to give you the love for him that would shape *how* you know him, and then to pursue the kind of knowledge and understanding that will help you love God going forward.

And if you are a non-Christian listening this morning, then this is a good time to point out that Christianity does not offer you a system or a pile of information from which you can master life,

or master God. That's not what the Bible or the Christian faith are about. What Christianity offers is knowledge of God that can shape you into someone who can love God and love the people around you who are made in God's image.

Our text this morning points us to the fundamental reality that what we know about God is shaped by what we most love.

And so, if you know God by faith, then you should thank him this morning that he gave you the initial love that led you to know him.

If you don't know God, then you should ask him this morning to give you a love that will drive you to him – that will grab your attention and set you off on a pilgrimage to better know him.

And as you see the places where you fall short this morning – and we all fall short – then your calling is to pray for and seek a love for God that will drive you to truly know him, and shape what you do with the knowledge you receive.

As we come before our God and Maker, let us not be like the student who is bored and without wonder at his desk. Let us not be like one studying the piano who knows the keys and the notes, but cannot embody them in a beautiful song. Let us not be like the man or woman who has a pile of facts about their spouse, but who doesn't love them enough to turn those facts into a foundation for loving action.

Instead, let us behold our God – in his word, in his people, in his creation – let us behold our God and let us be struck by wonder. Let us in loving awe turn our attention to him again and again. Let us in loving diligence and self-sacrifice devote ourselves to knowing him – to taking the facts we have, and building them into a foundation in our hearts. And let us then see the world from *that* vantage point, and live lives of love for our God.

Let us love God, and so know him.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Carson, D.A. *The Gospel According to John*. PNTC. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991.

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