

We Are Unique!

Trust

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I am going to begin this sermon by asking you to cooperate with me in a little experiment. Let us see how well you can follow directions and whether or not you trust me.

Would you please shut your eyes for just a minute while I continue to speak? I will not leave you alone. You just keep your eyes shut there for just a minute.

With that little introduction, are you beginning to wonder, "Do I really trust him?" Is he going to do something that might do a little bit of harm or make me feel a bit of embarrassment?"

You cannot see too much yet, can you? You might be able to see just a shading of light. But there is nothing you can really distinguish. You cannot make things out very well, can you?

Now, I am going to tell you something... (Do not open your eyes as yet.) What if I told you that there is a rat, or how about a mouse, up here on the stage with me? Would you believe me? Do you really believe that a mouse is on the stage with me?

Okay! You can open your eyes now. You can see now that Minnie Mouse is up here on stage with me!

There is a point to this little game we just played—an illustration. Before your eyes were opened you could not see things very well, could you? You could hear things that were being said, but the only thing that you could see was a minor bit of light. There was no outline that you could distinguish clearly. No matter how hard you may have tried, and even if I would have described something to you in great detail, with your eyes closed, you could not make things out very clearly, could you?

Things could enter your mind, but a clear distinguishing of what I would be telling you would not be there. You may even have felt just a bit foolish about that. Maybe suspicious that I was going to do something uncomfortable that you could no longer see—unsure about where I was going—a bit of distrust, perhaps even a little bit of fear, because you were not sure of me.

That is the way this world is. That is the way you and I were in regard to spiritual things. We got bits and pieces of information set into our minds. But, we were never able to really discern spiritual things before, and, as a result, we did not know where we were going.

I want you to begin this sermon with me in John 3:13, three verses before the most famous verse in the Bible. I want you to think about this principle in regard to this verse. I want you to think of it in relation to your own life in the past.

John 3:13 No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.

I wonder how many times did you read that out of the Bible or hear a preacher at your Protestant or Catholic Church maybe even quote that scripture, in reference to something? How many times did you read that before you were converted?

Perhaps in Sunday school, the teacher went over it. Perhaps you were a little bit more zealous and you attended Bible Study in the church and you heard it quoted there. And yet I would bet, if I were a betting man, that if you could recall going over that scripture, prior to your conversion, that you never questioned your own belief about going to heaven on the basis of that scripture.

Jesus Himself said that, "No one has ascended to heaven."

Are you beginning to see something develop here? Before a person is converted, they can read the Bible. But they do not really get distinct, clear truth from what they read.

Now, we are going to develop this principle as we go through the early parts of this sermon because I want to use this sermon to illustrate to you and me, that we are unique. I want that to be impressed upon your minds. There is a difference—God has made a difference in our minds—that is so great it sanctifies us. It sets us apart in a way that makes us distinct from others who have not had this opportunity of God doing this to their minds.

Now look at to whom this was said. It was said to Nicodemus.

John 3:10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?"

It is very interesting that there is a definite article before the word 'teacher.' It is to emphasize the fact that this man was in a position that was unusual for most Israelites, because he was a part of the Sanhedrin. He was a Pharisee named Nicodemus (verse 1). And he was very definitely a leader of the people who had set himself up, along with other Pharisees, to be the teachers of Israel. And he did not understand what Jesus was saying!

It was as though it went in one ear and out the other, even though Jesus gave him, what you and I would consider, very clear physical analogies that illustrate something spiritual. This highly educated man, a doctor of the law of God, did not get it. It almost seems from the way Jesus said what He said, as if there was a bit of sarcasm there.

"You, the *teacher* of Israel, cannot understand this simple analogy and its spiritual application?"

Nicodemus obviously did not get it. Nicodemus was coming at Christ, in the same way, with the same inbred, inborn, inherent blindness that every unconverted person has. And until that is miraculously removed, we have absolutely no opportunity to take advantage of truth in the way that God intended it to be taken advantage of.

Now that does not mean that a human being is often, by himself, incapable of perceiving spiritual truth. But what we need for salvation requires more than just being able to perceive isolated bits of spiritual truths.

This is one of the major reasons why there are so many denominations in the world. People split

up according to what they are able to see clearly. And these people split away from one group and they gather themselves together because they are in agreement with others who can see things in the same way that they can.

But yet you and I, from our perspective, can look on these groups and say, "Hey, they do not have it." They have some, but they do not have it. So, what God does in removing the blindness is more than to enable us to see isolated bits of spiritual truth because man, on his own, is able to do that.

Now what Jesus is saying here is that no one has gone to heaven to experience its realities and receive instructions and then returned and given it to man. And Christ is pointing to Himself and saying that He alone, among all men, has this experience; He alone, among all who ever lived, is able to reveal it.

That is the important point in this sermon. We are dealing with revelation and it is revelation that makes us unique. Revelation is a miracle that God works, so that we can eventually come to understand that we did not save ourselves. And we can come to understand that the efforts that we make toward salvation are very puny indeed.

Deuteronomy 29: 4 is a verse I hope you would inscribe in your memory banks so that we can understand and look at the Israelites in the right perspective.

Deuteronomy 29:4 Yet the LORD has not given you a heart to
perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear, to this very day.

God's freeing of these people from their bondage, His use of them in the journey to the promise land; His use of them in the promised land was for an entirely different purpose at that time. Now the experiences that these people had are going to stand them in good stead.

God did not use them for the purpose of abuse. He used them because he was causing Moses and others to reflect on their experiences in the wilderness. Then they could write those experiences down under the inspiration of God, so that you and I would have an accurate record to which we could look back to, understand the purpose of God, be humbled by it, and have the right perspective on our salvation.

So, He never gave them the Spirit of God. *No* salvation was really offered to them, *no* forgiveness of sin, *no* Holy Spirit was given to them. They did not have access to Him. They were, in a sense, actors on the stage. God was moving them about so that the record would be left for us.

Then, when they are resurrected later, they can look back on the record and hit themselves in the forehead and say, "Now I see." The scales will be removed at that time. But, the record is now written: He never gave them the Spirit of God. He never really revealed to them what he was doing with their lives.

And so, they reacted to all those circumstances in a way that human beings would normally react without the miracle having been performed on them by God, and the opening up of their minds and the revelations of what this whole thing is all about.

I mentioned the scripture back in Hebrews the 11th chapter; this was a confirmation that Paul reflected upon there in the book of Hebrews—that God preached the gospel to these people, at least the gospel that was pertaining to them. They heard good news and yet because it was not mixed with faith, it did not do them any good.

So all through the wilderness trek and on to their death, neither they nor their relationship with God improved in any way. If anything, it deteriorated as they went along.

Now let us look at another Old Testament scripture because once they got into the land things really did not change. And we are going to look at one in Judges 2:11-13. Now they are in the land and it is at least ostensibly under their control.

Judges 2:11-13 Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals; and they forsook the LORD God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger. They forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. And the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel...

And it goes on. It is just a continuing saga.

Now, I would tend to think that the context in which they experienced life would have helped. And you would think that somehow or another, they would be able to make the relationships, and *learn* from their recent history.

But now, have we, Americans, learned from our own history? Are we not repeating the mistakes of previous generations of Americans? We just do not do it, do we? We do not learn. Now I do not know who it was but I remember reading it in something I read that Harry Truman wrote: Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it. I think that someone earlier said it but I do not know who exactly it was at the time.

So the story continues. It gets worse.

Let us look at another scripture here, Romans 3, a very familiar thing that we are going over here. Again, I want to enforce on our minds, I hope indelibly, that a miracle has occurred to us. And I want us to be thankful that this has occurred, and to take advantage of it—not let it just muddle there in the back of our minds without doing anything about it.

Romans 3:9-11 What then? Are we better than they?" [Now he is speaking from the standpoint of being a Jew: Are we Jews better than others?] Not at all, for we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. [In the light of just reading that again, I think what Paul is saying is, *Are we any better? Are we Christians any better?*] As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God."

Oh, now, come on! That seems almost too astounding to agree with. But those are God's own words. God does not lie. There is nobody who ever lived, who ever sought after Him. Not even one person out of forty or fifty billion people who ever sought after Him!

There is a logical answer to why. Because nobody knows *Who* to look for. Everybody comes up with his own image of God and that is what he seeks for, but everybody's image is wrong.

And God shows that in the ritual of the Day of Atonement. It is so simply done. There are two goats. And both of them by all appearances are without blemish. But God has to point out miraculously which goat is His and represents His Son. The other is a counterfeit that just looks like it might be the right one. And that is the way it is, and why God can make an astounding statement like this.

Everybody looks for a God in his own image—of His own image, I should say—his own making. But the scripture cannot be broken. Now, how are we to understand this? Let us go to Romans 11, but before we do we will read Romans 10, right at the beginning (this verse just came to mind).

Romans 10:1-2 Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.

It is that principle that makes that statement in Romans 3 true —it is not according to knowledge—and that is the position from which everybody references God to. Nobody is approaching God with true knowledge until God Himself takes the initiative and begins to remove the blindness.

In Romans 11:7-10 Paul says:

Romans 11:7-10 What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded [hardened —the word there indicates what we call a callous on the skin; a callous develops] Just as it is written: "God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day." And David says: "Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a recompense to them. Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, and bow down their back always."

We find that if we look further, it is not that God has actually put blinders on people's eyes, but rather that He has just allowed things to develop without His intervention. And so people become blind, simply because God does not intervene in their lives.

Now, this "callous" that I mentioned metaphorically means "to make the heart dull and insensitive." And so by God simply not intervening the mind, which at birth would be open to receiving the truth of God, becomes calloused to it. Since God does nothing, society, through

the parents first and later the greater society begins to impress upon the child things that are not true about God. And the callous begins to develop on the mind, until metaphorically speaking, they are insensitive to the truth of God. That has happened to every single one of us since Adam and Eve.

We see the process very simply described in Genesis 3. It happens to us and it happens very quickly to us. This is why Mr. Armstrong (who used to warn especially the ministry; but I also heard him say it in sermons) would say, "You better get to your children right away because there is somebody waiting out there who will not wait [meaning Satan] and begin to blind the children's eyes to the truths of God." In Minister's meetings, he said—pointing his fingers at us with a great deal of emphasis—"You are your child's protector from Satan the Devil. And, if you do not do something, he [Satan] will."

All of us failed to some degree in doing that job because we do not move in and protect our children with the right kind of loving attitude, and the right kind of correction whenever it is needed (in the right kind of positive teaching) all along the road. And so, Satan does not wait; his society is all around, and they take over the religious and spiritual instruction of our children. And gradually, slowly but surely, the callous hardens on the mind and the child—you and me and those after us—becomes insensitive to God and does not know truth.

We do not recognize it when it hits us—until God works the miracle that He works.

Now Paul goes so far in Romans 8:7 to say that the carnal mind is not only insensitive to God, it is actually at war against God. That is how bad it gets. But there is an enmity there, *against* God.

This peculiarity in mankind has existed since the very beginning and we find Job making a comment in reply to... I believe it was Zophar. He is talking about... they called him "the evil."

Job 21:14 Yet they say to God, 'Depart from us, For we do not desire the knowledge of Your ways.

Now would you say this? It is very likely that you never consciously say this. But in our actions we do say it. We have the saying that actions speak louder than words. And so we ignore God. We may be religious, but by and large we ignore the true God. We ignore Him because by this time we are insensitive to Him.

Job 21:15 "Who is the Almighty, that we should serve Him? And what profit do we have if we pray to Him?"

That is pretty much the way it is. It is becoming worse and worse, is it not? Paul prophesied that as we approach the end, evil men shall wax and grow worse and worse. It is going to become so obvious.

Jesus prophesied that it is going to be just like the days of Noah, when every imagination and thought was only evil continually. Because you see God has allowed all stops to be pulled out of the way. And evil is picking up speed as it goes along, just like leavening in a piece of bread,

until everything is going to be so totally leavened, it is going to be absolutely corrupt. It will be so corrupt that if it was not for the mercy of God the best thing to do would be to just destroy the whole thing. But in order that His Name be glorified and His purpose fulfilled we know that He is not going to do that.

You see He has given you and me an opportunity to be spared from that—to do something with our lives by making choices based upon the revelation that He gives to us. It puts us right in the middle where our responsibility (if I can put it this way) is merely to choose to follow what He says. So the scales have been removed, the revelation has been made, in order that we might be able to freely choose.

The world is still in shackles of bondage, because they are not free to choose. The real insensitivity to Him is still there. There is really nothing they can do except go in the direction they see fit because the blinders are still on; they are staggering around metaphorically like a drunk—one drunk with the wine of the wrath of her fornication.

So we see then here it is a general statement regarding all of the wicked, and that includes all of us, until God begins to do what He does.

This enmity towards God was known way back in the book of Job; it was not new with the Apostle Paul. He picks up the principle right from there and he knew what he was saying was true because it had been recorded in God's Word all the way back then.

Now let us go to John 8: 43 where we will continue to lay layer upon layer here, so that we really see and appreciate what a miraculous thing has been done to us. Now we update this to Jesus' day.

John 8: 43 Why do you not understand My speech? [He says] Because you are not able to listen to My word.

They had ears to hear, but that is not what He meant. They heard the sounds and the sounds formed themselves into words and words were comprehended to some degree, but they did not really relate to what He was saying. It just did not hit the right chords so that they could make the right use of them. And I can almost see Jesus saying in exasperation, " Why do you not understand?" Then He goes on to explain why.

John 8: 44-45, 47 You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me....He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God.

I could just turn around what Jesus said and paraphrase it. Because what He said was, "*You are unable to hear what I say.*" He is implying that the problem is inherent. It was as if He were

speaking in one language and they were hearing in another language, so that what He said was totally incomprehensible to them.

Now if you are well aware of what is says in Chapter 8 you will understand that the context had to do with freedom, with liberty. We are looking here in Chapter 8 at a people who were in bondage; they were in slavery and they did not even know it.

That is why they said, "We have never been in bondage." They had a measure of liberty, a political liberty (a certain measure of it). But, even then they were under the heels of the Romans; even so they had a certain amount of freedom and they apparently considered it enough freedom for what they needed for their life. Ordinarily, the Roman way was this: Once the nation was crushed, they would give the people quite a measure of liberty, as long they behaved themselves.

You see, Jesus was speaking of one thing, yet they comprehended it in an entirely different way. He was speaking within spiritual parameters and thinking about the Kingdom of God; they were hearing in political parameters, and thinking about the here and now. So it just did not jive.

Now they became this way in the same way that you and I did, in that they lived and operated in a world of lies. That is why Jesus mentioned Satan—that he was a murderer and a liar from the very beginning. And all the ways of this world—which seem to be so right carnally—are really nothing but that which is founded upon lies, distortions and falsehoods. The truth of God to somebody reared in that kind of circumstance or situation comes out as so much 'gobble-de-gook'. The mind simply does not relate.

Okay, you say, "John Ritenbaugh, you are talking about the unconverted world. What about Jesus' disciples? Surely, they got it." Did they?

Now we are going to see they did not get it very well either. They got more than the world did. But even they—right in the presence of our Savior for three and a half years—could not put the pieces together properly.

And part of the reason they could not do it was the same reason why you and I do not function as well spiritually as we should, because there is a carry-over from the world. It takes quite a while for the thinking to be converted.

What we are going to look at here is something that is really a pretty frequent occurrence in the New Testament.

Luke 18:31-34 Then He took the twelve aside and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. They will scourge Him and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again." But they understood none of these things; this saying was hidden from them, and they did not know the things which were spoken.

There might be a number of reasons why that occurred. But, I have already mentioned one that we carry with us: quite a measure of trash, baggage, refuse we learned from the world and it takes a long time for it to be overcome. They may not have gotten it also because they did not want to see what He was speaking about come to pass.

I think that you know what the normal Jewish concept of the Messiah is. The normal concept, even today, of the Jew is that the Messiah is going to be a man, and that this man is going to be used to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Right now the favorite candidate is Rabbi Schmearson from New York City. You will see his name in the newspapers from time to time because some group is proclaiming him as Messiah. Unfortunately, the "Messiah" is around ninety years old, he is blind, and the last I heard, he was on life support equipment.

But this is that same kind of thinking that was in their minds of the apostles. They did not want to hear that their friend Jesus, whom they admired and respected, and were by this time worshipping—as they came to recognize who He was—put through any pain.

They did not want to see Him hurt, and they did not want to see Him killed, because their dreams, their hopes, and their concepts that they brought into the relationship with Christ did not permit that kind of a Messiah. And so these feelings were at war with the truth they were receiving from Him. And so they were not sensitive to what He was saying. If they were really sensitive, though they might have been saddened, they would have agreed that this was what the Word of God said had to be done. And they would have accepted this in a good manner.

So the mind fights, because that callous has been there. I think that you know that time and time again, Jesus had to take His disciples aside and explain to them what it was He had just said to the public. There is really a vivid illustration of this in Luke, chapter 24.

Luke 24:1-4 Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. Then they went in and did not find the body of the LORD Jesus. And it happened, as they were greatly perplexed about this, that behold, two men stood by them in shining garments.

Now, had He not told them quite a number of times that He was going to be in the grave, three days and three nights (on the third day, in three days)? Three days before, in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus had told them that this was going to occur. You see what I mean about the mind fighting against the truth of God?

They did not want to fight against the truth. Can you begin to see why Paul would say that there is an enmity there? I will tell you, we would have never gotten as far as we have gotten without the miracle that God has already worked.

Are you are beginning to see something else about it? That is, He does not stop working—because even though there is an initial removing of the blindness, it has to be a work in progress in which God is constantly removing blindness.

The miracle continues right up until the day that God allows us to die or He sends His son and we are changed. In other words, the removing of the blindness is not a one-time thing. It is a process that continues to unfold.

Luke 24:10-11 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them, who told these things to the apostles. And their words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them.

Three and a half years with Immanuel; three and a half years with God in the flesh—day in, day out, night and day, sitting around fires, cooking their meals, talking, walking, interacting with and receiving instructions from on a personal basis—YET His resurrection, regardless of how many times He said it, seemed to them as idle tales.

It was too astounding—perhaps that is the reason. "Oh! This cannot be!" Now wait a minute! Had He not just resurrected Lazarus just a short time before? They already had a witness that it could be done. It happened right in front of their eyes! But their words seemed like idle tales.

Do you think that a miracle is not taking place in you? It is, very much.

Let us drop down a little bit further. As we continue to read here in verse 13:

Luke 24:13-16 Now behold, two of them were traveling that same day to a village called Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem. And they talked together of all these things which had happened. So it was, while they conversed and reasoned, that Jesus Himself [the resurrected Christ] drew near and went with them. But their eyes were restrained, so that they did not know Him.

He engaged them in conversation and He engaged them in such a way that they were required to report to Him all those things that had occurred in the last several days.

Luke 24:21 But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel...

There we have it right there, they thought the Messiah was to be a man. But now their hopes were dashed. And they were in the depths of discouragement. You see that blinder had not been removed yet. The Messiah was going to be God, the Messiah was going to be the Immortal, Immutable, the All-Powerful, Almighty Creator—who is a spirit being, not a human being.

Luke 24:21-22 "...And indeed besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened...[Then they reported on what occurred earlier that day] And certain women of our company arrived at the tomb early and astonished us."

You see they did not believe.

Luke 24:28-30 Then they drew near to the village where they were going, and He indicated that He would have gone farther. But they constrained Him, saying, "Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent." And He went in to stay with them. Now it came to pass, as He sat at the table with them, that He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened...

Now the scripture does not indicate that God in any way actually forcefully closed their eyes. But rather something now occurs. Maybe it was in the way that He did something—something with which they were familiar. Maybe it was a little idiosyncrasy in the way He broke bread. I do not know how He did it, but they were eating there, and He took their loaf of bread and broke it in such a way. Bang! The lights went on! And they recognized who it was that they were talking to.

Luke 24:31-32 Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him; and He vanished from their sight. And they said to one another, "Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?"

Then they went back. (My eye just caught something i