

## Testing our Response to Jesus

Matt. 11:16-24

**Intro.** Beginning with His genealogy and the record of His birth, the purpose of Matthew's gospel is to demonstrate that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah of Israel and Savior of the world. Everything written in this book underscores that purpose. Jesus demonstrated His credentials by miracles of healing... miracles the OT prophets said Messiah would perform when He came. When circumstances caused John to doubt, we saw last time how Jesus stood up for his man the way He intercedes for all who trust Him. Jesus declared John's uniqueness as the forerunner God promised through His prophets, Isaiah and Malachi. We ended at **v.15** where Jesus said, **He who has ears, let him hear.**

Now I'm thinking not many in that Galilean crowd were deaf. Their ears worked. So Jesus wasn't talking about hearing in the physical sense. He was talking about hearing with spiritual understanding...hearing more than words and sounds...but hearing aided by God which results in hearts and minds open to believe. **Prov. 20:10** says, **Ears to hear and eyes to see--both are gifts from the LORD. (NLT)** This is true both physically and spiritually. Later in **Matt. 13:16** Jesus told His disciples **"...blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear."** This ability...to recognize and to understand the truth about Christ are gifts of God's grace. And listen, the Lord still opens blind eyes and unstops deaf ears. The Holy Spirit enlightens the minds of those who seek the Lord. But not everyone accepted John or his message. And not everyone listened to Jesus with a heart open to embrace Him as their Messiah.

So that's where we are in this chapter. We've come to a point of decision. This AM we'll see how Jesus emphasized the urgency and necessity of responding to the light we've been given...to believe Him. Here's how it works...if a person will respond to the truth they are given...God has promised to open their eyes, encourage their faith and give them more light. Remember what Jesus promised in **Matt. 7:7, 8** - **"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."** So if unanswered questions stand in the way of faith...ask, seek and knock. Go to the One who has the answers. That's what John the Baptist did. He sent his question to Jesus and Jesus gave him light and assurance. But no one should expect faith to grow who doesn't seek the Lord. Even though faith to believe is a gift of God's grace, faith isn't produced magically or automatically. It grows as we open our Bibles, pray, and take some wobbly steps in pursuit of the Lord. **Isa. 55:6** says, **Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.**

So in those days, the Lord had come near to His people. His coming and the sign miracles demanded a response...a decision one way or the other. When it comes to Jesus Christ, there is no neutral position! To believe and embrace Him is forgiveness, life and peace. To ignore Him is to remain unforgiven. To reject His offer of salvation is to live in fear you must answer to God for your sin.

So the passage this morning tests our response. Have we believed the testimony of God, or have we responded with indifference. Many in that generation were critical of Jesus while others were too busy to take Him seriously. Though 20 centuries have passed, human nature hasn't changed. **Rom. 8:7** - **...the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.** From birth, every one of us is antagonistic and at war with God and the Savior He sent to rescue us. We're wired that way. It takes a miracle of God's grace to change our minds and soften our hearts.

As a general observation, notice how Jesus identified His subject in **v.7** - (He) **began to speak to the crowd about John:** So that earlier section is **about John...John** the Baptist. But now in **v.16** Jesus has a different subject. Here He says, **"To what can I compare this generation?"** So this section is about the **generation** of Jewish people to whom John and Jesus ministered. As the Master Teacher, Jesus used an analogy or comparison to describe the spiritual condition of Israel at that time.

Because the evidence God gave to assist their faith was so compelling, Jesus exposed the unreasonableness and peril of the nation's response. What we find first in **vs. 16-19** is...

**1. That generation compared to children at play – vs.16-19** present the analogy - **“To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.”**

Don't you love to watch children at play? They can take anything and make a game out of it. And it doesn't matter where you go in the world...the traits of children at play are the same. One group wants to play something and tries to get others to join in, but the non-joiners are off to the side with their I-phones and I-pads. They're happy with their electronics and don't want to be bothered! The world of the first century was no different...except for the electronics. Children loved to play games. After Israel's captivity, the prophet Zechariah looked ahead to happier days. **Zech. 8:5 – “The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there.”**

There's a big picture idea here we might overlook. Notice that Jesus compared the response of that generation to that which is childish and immature. Most were unwilling to recognize the seriousness of serious things. They frittered their lives away playing games. But isn't it the same in our world today? Millions of hours will be devoted to March madness...but most have little time to worship and serve the Lord. We play games and fritter away our lives with little thought of eternity.

In the world of Jesus' day, two games were popular. Children seem to have played these games at the marketplace while their parents did their shopping or transacted business. Our favorites may have been kick the can or Red Rover, but they played wedding and funeral. The wedding game involved **dancing** and the happy music of a **flute**. A wedding is a time of celebration, joy and festivity. We might imagine a boy who pretends to be a groom and a girl who pretends to be a bride. (Though we are far more enlightened, the ancients never imagined a same sex wedding!) Several children formed the wedding party / one boy was the rabbi / and others were musicians. It was great fun! The children simply re-enacted wedding ceremonies they'd seen. Boys and girls still play this game today.

One of my first challenges as a young pastor was to officiate an outdoor wedding for a friend of a church member. I didn't yet realize that pastors don't have to say “OK” to every couple that asks him to marry them. After I did my part and left, some uninvited and thoroughly inebriated guests crashed the reception. A fight broke out. Though I wasn't there, the police blotter in the Sunday paper suggested a different story line. It read...“*Fight breaks out at backyard wedding officiated by Pastor Dean Stewart of Pleasant Valley Baptist Church.*” Several church members blessed me with a copy of that article. But a post-ceremony brawl probably wasn't part of the game Jesus was talking about.

Along with weddings, the other big social event of that time was a funeral. Since no one would join the wedding game, those in a playful mood tried to attract the sideliners with a different game...the funeral game. Sounds lively, doesn't it? Jesus referred to this game when He said, **“we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.”** Again, we can imagine how the game was played. A boy pretending to be a rabbi leads the procession. Then some kids played the bereaved family and friends who trail behind the deceased with hired singers and mourners playing their part. And let's not forget the actor who remains motionless and silent through it all. Even though children were entertained by both of these games, the atmosphere of these games was quite different. The wedding game was happy, festive and light...but the funeral game was solemn, grave and gloomy. So the analogy envisions a situation where the group on the sidelines is invited to play, but they don't want to join in either game. They don't feel like dancing and they don't feel like mourning! They respond with indifference because neither game interests them. That's the analogy.

But then in **vs.18, 19** Jesus explained what the analogy means. **For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners." 'But wisdom is proved right by her actions.'** John came **neither eating nor drinking**. In a rough and austere way, John was like the prophet Elijah. His repent or face judgment message, was grave and solemn...like the atmosphere of a funeral. John's message sounded like the dirge and mourning of a funeral. And the sideliners refused to join in...**they say, He has a demon**. They said, "This unusual learner from the desert is demon possessed!" His solemn message and serious demeanor is a sign he has an evil spirit. It was the Pharisees who invented and spread this charge against John.

On the other hand, **the Son of Man came eating and drinking**...Jesus mingled and conversed with crowds in a free and familiar way...like those who socialize at a wedding. His ordinary appearance and demeanor didn't distinguish Him the way John's did. John fasted but Jesus feasted. Even though the message of John and Jesus was essentially the same...John emphasized sin and the need to repent because judgment was coming. Jesus emphasized the need to repent because grace had come. Though entirely separate from sin, Jesus didn't distance Himself from sinners. He went to places where the company was mixed. Because Jesus came to reach and to save the lost, He didn't avoid even tax collectors and sinners! So the holier than thou bunch said, **Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners**. So this generation was like children who didn't want to play funeral and didn't want to play the wedding game either. They dismissed John as demon possessed and they criticized Jesus as lacking principle and holiness. As you may recall, the criticism against Jesus also originated with Israel's religious leaders.

So the situation was simply this...like children who refused to be happy with anything, Israel was uncooperative and resistant. They didn't want the truth God sent to them. They didn't want John's message of repentance and they didn't want Christ's message of forgiveness. They didn't want the law John represented and they didn't want the grace Jesus embodied. They dismissed John because he fasted...he didn't eat or drink. Yet they were critical of Jesus because He did both! This comes as no surprise because later in **Matt. 23:37** Jesus said, "**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.**"

At this point, Dr. William Barclay makes an observation about human nature. "*The plain fact is that when people do not want to listen to the truth, they easily enough find an excuse for not listening. They don't even try to be consistent in their criticism. They will criticize the same person and the same institution from quite opposite grounds and reasons. If people are determined to make no response, they will remain stubbornly and sullenly unresponsive no matter what invitation is made to them.*" Haven't we witnessed this? People hostile to God find fault with the music / the preaching / the schedule of services / the members / and even the furniture of the church! In their unbelief and self-justification, they criticize everything! So what does the church do? Like a bunch of dummies we try to accommodate them. We try to make ourselves more "seeker friendly." We apologize, adjust and adapt. If they say they want green, we paint our walls green. If we feel they want church without getting out of the car, we give them a drive-in church. Our intentions are good, but until God breaks a rebellious heart, sinners are at war with Him and no adjustments we make can change that! But listen...when God opens our eyes to the reality of Christ, none of those non-essentials matter! Though the preacher is a hound dog, those in love with Jesus will howl God's praises with Him.

Before this section ends, Jesus said something vital. He said, "**But wisdom is proved right by her actions.**" In other words, the wisdom of God's message delivered by John and by Jesus is **proved to be true and right** by the results it produces...the resulting **actions**. By the gospel of grace, millions have been saved and brought into the kingdom.

History is replete with stories of lives transformed by Jesus Christ! Every believer is living proof of God's grace and wisdom. A testimony we've heard so many times goes like this...*"I shudder to think where I'd be today if it wasn't for Jesus and His power to save!"* Am I right about that?

**2. The Galilean cities condemned because of indifference – vs. 20-22** - Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. **"Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.**

It was the sheer apathy and indifference of **Chorazin, Bethsaida** and **Capernaum** that invited such strong rebuke from the Lord. So much of Christ's ministry took place in Galilee where all three of these cities are located. **Chorazin** was a small village nestled in the hills about 2 1/2 miles north of **Capernaum**. **Bethsaida** was located farther north and to the west in the plains of Gennesaret. In this region, Jesus taught in the synagogues / proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom and / healed every kind of disease and sickness. So **Chorazin** and **Bethsaida** received a compelling witness. They had no excuse for not responding to the Lord. They heard His message with their own ears. They saw His miracles with their own eyes. Yet most responded apathetically. They were thrilled when Jesus healed somebody physically. They were amazed by all that Jesus said and did. But there was little response. Like children, they weren't serious about serious things. They were unresponsive like the children in the analogy. They were fickle like crowds who followed after Jesus fed the five thousand. They liked the miracles / ate the food / and enjoyed the show. But when the call was made to follow in Jesus' footsteps, they were quick to retreat. There was no true faith...just passing interest. Life went on and they quickly returned to their daily activities with no further thought of Him.

This condemnation from Jesus is severe and somewhat out of character, but necessary. **Tyre and Sidon** were two gentile cities that epitomized pagan corruption and worthlessness. They were centers for Baal worship and notorious for immorality and godlessness. In the past these cities had sold God's people into slavery. One of **Tyre's** kings was so wicked that he was chosen to exemplify the nature and destiny of Satan. According to the prophecy given to Ezekiel, the Lord destroyed **Tyre** and promised it would never be rebuilt. Yet given the same privileges and blessings these three Galilean cities were given, Jesus said **Tyre** and **Sidon** would have repented... they would have been more responsive to Him than they had been. As a result, God's judgment would be less severe for **Tyre** and **Sidon** than it would be for these cities.

Then Jesus singled out **Capernaum**. **vs. 23, 24** - **And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.**" Located on the northwest shore of the sea of Galilee, **Capernaum** became home to Jesus. (**Matt. 4:13**) Half of the Twelve disciples lived either in **Capernaum** or nearby. When they should have been humbled by this special blessing, the people of **Capernaum** became proud. They felt somehow worthy to be exalted or **lifted up to the skies**. But instead of being lifted up, Jesus said they would descend or go down to **Hades**. **Hades** here refers to eternal hell. Jesus said it would be better for **Sodom on the day of judgment** than for **Capernaum**. **Sodom** was and is a synonym for moral depravity. The name, **Sodom** is used to describe the most extreme forms of sexual perversion. Because of these sins God totally destroyed Sodom and its sister city, Gomorrah. He sent down a shower of fire and brimstone. These verses indicate there will be degrees of punishment in Hell. But the case of **Capernaum, Chorazin** and **Bethsaida** prove that apathy and indifference are high on the list of sins the Lord hates and will surely punish. Did you know that? Did you know that indifference is that serious to God?

### 3. The challenge for everyone today – Heb. 4:2

Billy Graham wrote the following paragraph...*“The average man is comfortable in his complacency and as unconcerned as a silverfish ensconced in a carton of discarded magazines on world affairs. Man is not asking any questions, because his social benefits from the government give him a false sense of security. This is his trouble and his tragedy. Modern man has become a spectator of world events, observing on his television screen without becoming involved. He watches the ominous events of our times pass before his eyes, while he sips his beer in a comfortable chair. He doesn’t seem to realize what is happening to him. He doesn’t understand his world is on fire and that he is about to be burned with it.”*

The passage this morning ends with a sober warning that tests our response to Jesus Christ. While some react with childish criticism and indifference, Jesus emphasizes the responsibility of those who have been specially privileged. In **Lk. 12:48** He laid down a principle...**From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.** The three Galilean cities had first hand encounters with Jesus Christ. Though they had seen His many miracles...most remained indifferent to His claims. They didn’t reject Him out right, as the religious leaders did...they just did nothing. They responded with utter indifference. Though some lived moral lives and tried to follow the Mosaic Law, they didn’t respond to what Jesus said to them. They refused to repent of their sins and they felt no need for God’s grace. They were unwilling to face the seriousness of serious things. Satisfied with the status quo and hearing the criticism of their leaders, they were unwilling to follow Him.

You and I have been overly blessed and more privileged than any people before us. Many of us were raised in Christian homes and churches. Not only have we heard the truth this AM, but we have copies of the Bible in our own language and preferred versions. We have no excuse for misunderstanding God’s message or taking it lightly. God will hold us responsible. If you’re not a Christian, this passage says today is the day to repent and get right with the Lord. Ask Christ to save you. Believe that He died for you. Confess your sin to Him. Ask Him to come into your life and make you one of His followers.

If you know you’re a Christian, this passage emphasizes how important it is for us to be responsive and obedient to Christ’s commands. True faith is always responsive and obedient. Coming to church and listening to a sermon can be little more than a routine. It can be like showing up at a fitness center. But sitting on an exercise machine and actually using and benefitting from exercise are two different matters. **Heb. 4:2 - For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.**

The fact is this...we can’t claim from Christ what we want and ignore what we don’t want. Being a Christian means to be like Christ and that comes as we yield ourselves to the Lord and do what He asks us to do. His grace provides the desire and the power to do it, but we must be responsive and willing. If you’re living for Christ as you should and receive the kind of criticism John the Baptist and Jesus received, take heart and remain faithful. Jesus said, **“Wisdom is proved right by her actions.”**

But don’t be a sideliners. Don’t relegate ministry to others when Christ has done so much for you. Follow Him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Now is the time to prove our love and live by faith. Now is the time to be in the game and serious about eternity.