

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
March 23, 2025

No Bystanders Allowed

Matthew 11:16-24

When we deal with Matthew 11, it's tempting to leap over the first two-thirds of the chapter and land in the concluding section, where Jesus extends his memorable invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (vv. 28-30). Now, at first glance, that sounds like just what we harried, hurried people need. We need someone to lighten our load, someone to give us a break, someone to help us step back out of the action so we can just watch for a while, rather than constantly feeling like we have to get in there and get something done. Just when life gets too heavy to bear, here comes Jesus offering retreat and rest.

But in this morning's Scripture passage, there's no time for rest, no invitation to retreat. There's only a call to repentance. Instead of opening his arms, Jesus points his finger. He points it at all those who reject the kingdom of God. "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" (vv. 21-22). Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on to indict Capernaum for the way it glories in itself, revels in its economic significance, and pushes spiritual matters to the margin.

According to Jesus, the way to rest leads through repentance. Go back to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Matthew says that the sum and substance of Jesus' message was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (4:17). So Jesus comes announcing that through him, the reign of God has arrived. Something so world-changing and so life-altering can't just be ignored. On the contrary, it calls for a response. And the appropriate response is repentance.

We often associate repentance with feelings of remorse and regret, coupled with the desire for God's forgiveness. In other words, repentance is about being sorry for your sins and throwing yourself on God's mercy. While this is certainly an important part of repentance, repentance is about more than just feelings, attitudes, and intentions. Repentance is also about concrete behavior that demonstrates you're turning away from sin and returning to the God who has created you and redeemed you.

Turning around and returning to God is what Jesus calls for in those who would be his disciples. In this morning's Scripture, Jesus uses a parable about children to show us what refusing to repent looks like. In this parable, Jesus draws upon behavior that virtually all of us have witnessed when children get together to play. It can happen between two children. "Daddy, I want to play dolls but she just wants to color pictures. Tell her to play dolls with me. If she doesn't, I'm not going to be her friend anymore." Or it can happen between groups of children. "Hey, we've got an idea. Let's play tag," says one group. "No, we don't want to play tag. We've got a better idea. Let's play on the jungle gym." "No, we already

played on the jungle gym,” comes the reply. “Let’s do something else, like jump on the trampoline.” “No, we don’t want to do that.” They go back and forth for awhile until eventually, no one wants to play anything. They take their little groups and go hang out separately.

In his own day and time, Jesus watched children in the marketplace interacting with one another and knew very well how fun could quickly turn into a feud. In fact, he compared some of his contemporaries to these fickle boys and girls. These were children who had watched the rituals and behaviors of adults at marriage celebrations and funeral ceremonies, and knew how to imitate. One group says, “Hey, we’ve got an idea. Let’s play wedding. We can dance and pretend someone’s playing the flute.” “No, that’s boring,” says the other group. “We’ve got a better idea. Let’s play funeral. We can wail and scream and pretend we’re covered with ashes.” “No, just forget it,” says the other group. “We didn’t really want to play with you all anyway.” The whole situation falls apart, and everyone just stands there with arms folded, mad at one another. No one wants to play. No one wants to participate.

“That’s what this generation is like,” says Jesus. According to Jesus, they’ve already witnessed lots of demonstrations of God’s power. They’ve seen plenty of manifestations of God’s will to save his people. There has been no shortage of signs that God is on the move and his reign is underway. And yet, they still refuse to repent. They still prefer to stand on the sidelines rather than get in the game.

In order to make his point, Jesus even brings John the Baptist into the discussion. He compares his own style of ministry to John’s. John had a more austere, strict, and ascetic way about him. He removed himself from many of the normal forms of social interaction. He focused more on God’s righteous demands for those who claim to be his people. Jesus, on the other hand, spent more time hanging out with, particularly eating with, those who were categorized as sinners. Though he too preached repentance, Jesus focused even more on the radical inclusiveness of God’s grace.

To put it another way, John came in more of a funeral mode. He was criticized for being too strict, too much of a hermit, too serious about everything. In fact, some went so far as to say that he was mentally unbalanced, maybe even possessed. Jesus, by contrast, came in more of a wedding mode. He was criticized for being too lax with the law, too willing to mix with the wrong kind of people. In fact, some went so far as to say that he was an undisciplined glutton. So there you have it. In the eyes of some, John didn’t mix and mingle enough, and Jesus mixed and mingled too much. There must have been times when Jesus and John said to themselves, “I’m damned if I do, and damned if I don’t.” No matter what they did, they couldn’t win, because some people were determined to do nothing but criticize.

William Barclay says, “The plain fact is that when people do not want to listen to the truth, they will easily enough find an excuse for not listening. They do not even try to be consistent in their criticism. They’ll 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.”¹

This lack of response, cloaked under the guise of criticism, is what drives Jesus to denounce the cities that refuse to repent. As one person has put it, “They decided it was easier to complain about the messengers than to respond in obedience to the message.”² In our own

lives, we too need Jesus to help us recognize and acknowledge the ways that we ignore and avoid his call to repent.

Sometimes we try to ignore the call of Christ by changing the subject. We talk to Christ about everything except what we know he wants us to consider or to do. Sometimes we try to ignore the call of Christ by shifting the focus from ourselves to others. We spend more time examining their sins than we do examining our own. Sometimes we try to ignore the call of Christ by tuning out his voice. We don't study the Scriptures, devote ourselves to prayer, or participate in worship. Sometimes we try to ignore the call of Christ by disconnecting ourselves from the life of his people. We keep a safe distance from the congregation or avoid getting too deeply involved in its ministry. Sometimes we try to ignore the call of Christ by closing ourselves off to the sufferings, afflictions, and needs of others. We focus on taking care of number one rather than opening our eyes to the injustices that keep others down.

And sometimes, as we see in this morning's Scripture, we try to ignore the call of Christ by staying on the sidelines and lobbing criticisms. Sometimes these criticisms are aimed at Christ himself. Why doesn't Jesus see things more the way we see them? Why doesn't he soften the demands of the gospel and make them less radical? Why doesn't Jesus crack down on people who reject God's rules? Why does he have to be so willing to embrace others who are so different from us?

Sometimes, the criticisms are aimed at Christ's followers. That church is just full of hypocrites who think they're better than everyone else. All the church ever wants is money so they can have a bigger, shinier building and the preacher can drive a fancier car. I'm not into organized religion, with all its institutions and traditions and hierarchy. Those people in that congregation don't care about the needs of others. All they care about is getting together on Sunday morning, having their little service, and going back home. The church, in fact religion as a whole, is the biggest reason there are so many problems in the world.

You may recognize some of these criticisms, having heard them from family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. I'm not saying that the church is spotless. The fact is, we Christians have a very mixed record, to put it generously, when it comes to living up to what we profess. So some of the criticism is justly deserved. There's plenty of repentance that needs to go on within the household of faith. I'm simply saying that many times, it's easier to stand outside the church and hurl condemnations than it is to honestly engage the call of Christ and heed the claim of Christ upon our lives.

Someday, at the final judgment, we will all have to give an account of how we have responded to Christ, and what we have done with the reign of God. This is why Jesus warns us about trying to be bystanders. Being a bystander means being a nonparticipating spectator. It means staying on the sidelines where it's safe to observe and analyze rather than getting involved where you have to trust and obey. By contrast, authentic repentance means that you refuse to be a bystander. It means that you take the claims of Christ seriously, that you make a commitment to Christ and his church, and that you get in the game. You devote yourself to being part of God's plan, and you get involved in what God is doing in the world.

¹ Quoted in John MacArthur, "Treating Christ with Criticism and Indifference." *Grace to You*, <http://www.gty.org/Resources/Transcripts/2287> (July 3, 2008).

² Roger Hahn, "Matthew 10:16-11:19." *CRI/Voice, Institute*, <http://www.crivoice.org/biblestudy/bbmatt8.html> (July 3, 2008).