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Matthew 11:16 - 11:19



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this passage, Jesus addresses the mindset of those who find fault with both John the Baptist and Himself, regardless of their differences in lifestyle. Jesus suggests that these individuals are simply making excuses to avoid responding to God, rather than having a genuine objection to either John or Himself. He cautions that rejecting truth and love may lead to damnation, while accepting it wholeheartedly can lead to salvation. Ultimately, Jesus emphasizes the importance of following Him faithfully, even if it means taking one's own life.

Transcript

In Matthew chapter 11, Jesus was talking about John the Baptist and speaking about what a great man he was, and what his great significance was in terms of God's kingdom, and having spoken thus about John the Baptist, Jesus reflected on how his generation had had the benefit of two great prophets. One was John the Baptist and the other was Jesus Himself. And that neither of these great prophets had had any real impact on the generation.

Now, I don't mean to say that there was no one in Jesus' generation who followed Him or who believed in Him. There certainly were such people, but it's not as if a greater number of them did than were following God before Jesus came, because there was always a remnant of the faithful before that. But in general, the generation of Israel that should have recognized the Messiah, neglected or failed to recognize Him, and eventually basically approved of His crucifixion.

There were, of course, exceptions, but except for those exceptions, the generation of Jewish people that lived in Jesus' time, at least those in Israel where He lived, did not respond in the way that you would expect that they would to their prophets. And that's what Jesus is musing about when we come to Matthew 11, 16 and following. Jesus said, but to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to their companions and saying, We played the flute for you, and you didn't dance.

We mourned to you, but you did not lament. 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, Look, a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

But wisdom is justified by her children, said Jesus. Now, let's have a look at this. I've encountered many people who have experienced great difficulty understanding what Jesus was talking about here, though it's really not all that hard to take apart.

Jesus is talking about His generation, and He means, of course, the Jewish people of His day, to whom He and John had been appealing and trying to bring to repentance and trying to draw into the kingdom of God. He said that they were not responsive. His bottom line is that they didn't respond to John, and they didn't respond to Jesus.

Now, the point he's making is that John and Jesus took diametrically opposed approaches to religion in one sense. Of course, only in one sense. John and Jesus had the same religion, but as far as their religious style, it was quite different.

John was an ascetic. John didn't eat ordinary meals. He ate only a very stark diet, such as he could find wild in the wilderness, locusts and wild honey.

He lived a Spartan existence. This would appeal to some kind of religious people. There are a certain type of people who feel that to be really spiritual, you have to renounce the pleasures of the world and the flesh, and you have to live an ascetic sort of a life, that you have to have no comforts and no luxuries, and the more of these you renounce, the more spiritual you are and the more credible and the more impressive you are.

For the people who looked at religion that way, John the Baptist should have been very impressive, because he was a wilderness prophet, he lived a very self-denying lifestyle, and that should have made everybody happy. On the other hand, Jesus would appeal in his style to people who had a different approach. There are people who don't particularly interpret spirituality in terms of self-denial.

They would think of spirituality in terms of celebrating their religious experiences, celebrating their religious privileges, and enjoying life, enjoying God, enjoying people. There is certainly much to be said for that style of religion too. In the book of Psalms, we certainly find a great deal of celebration, a great deal of exhortation to praise God with the dance and with the musical instruments and so forth, and to rejoice, and Jesus actually seemed to come in with a religious style that we would think appealed to those who saw religion through that way, because Jesus was not like John.

Jesus was not living a Spartan life. He didn't live a rich life either, but he did not live an ascetic life. He did not deny himself a good meal.

He did not stay away from feasts and parties. As a matter of fact, he drew criticism upon himself, because he was a little more free in attending such events than some of the

more religious people thought he should be. But the point Jesus is making here is that although John was sent by God and Jesus was sent by the same God, and they were both representatives of the same God, they came in very different styles of religious demonstration.

John, the more self-denying, ascetic, Spartan kind of a religious prophet, and Jesus, more the man of affairs, the man who's among the people, a man who worked at a job really for 30 years as a carpenter, and then who goes out and he's very sociable. He attends feasts when he's invited. He eats good food.

He'll drink the wine that's at the table. John wouldn't, because John had a Nazarite vow. The point is that Jesus and John had very different styles.

Now, what Jesus is saying here is that the people of Israel did not respond to either style. He says, Verse 18, he says, For John came, neither eating nor drinking. Now, of course, he ate and drank, but Jesus is abbreviating his statement here, or Matthew is, because in Luke, the parallel in Luke 7, 33 says that John came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and of course, that's what Jesus means here.

John ate and he drank, but he didn't eat bread or drink wine. He didn't eat the normal foods people did. And it says, John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say he has a demon.

In other words, rather than being impressed by his self-denial, they think he's got a religious demon, a religious spirit, something, a legalism about him or something. They don't, you know, they find something to object to in him. And then Jesus says, Well, and so the Son of Man, and of course, he means himself here, came eating and drinking.

Now, what he means by this is Jesus ate what John did not eat and drank what John did not drink. Now, since in Luke it says that John didn't eat bread or drink wine, this means, of course, that Jesus did eat bread and drink wine. He, in other words, participated in the ordinary food that people ate on a regular basis.

He did not come with a special diet. He associated with people at regular meals. And so he was unlike John in this respect.

He did not come with this strict form of self-denial on his eating habits and his lifestyle. And what was their response to him? They didn't like John. What did they think about Jesus? He says, Well, they say, Look, a gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

Now, that is a criticism they lodged against Jesus, just as they criticized John. And here's the irony, Jesus says. You know, it seems like you people are rather hard to please.

God has sent two messengers to you, remarkable messengers, both, and they have

come to appeal to different sensitivities. Your religious style may be one or another, but whichever way you seem drawn, there is one of these messengers who lives the way that you should approve. John the Baptist comes in the ascetic lifestyle.

Jesus comes in more the celebrant of lifestyle. And those who don't like the one ought to like the other. But what Jesus is saying is the people didn't like either.

John's lifestyle was too stark. They said, He must have a religious demon. And Jesus' lifestyle they found occasion to criticize because he didn't live in that same kind of self-restraint that John did, or even than the Pharisees did.

Now, the Pharisees were not ascetics, but they would not associate with tax collectors and sinners. And Jesus did. Jesus went to feasts and parties with these people.

Now, he never got drunk, but he drank wine. And he, you know, he was not a glutton, but he ate bread. But his critics, because he so freely ate in these situations, accused him of being a glutton and a wino, which, of course, were false accusations.

Now, the point of Jesus' message here is that these people are implacable. They will not be pleased. God can take almost any approach, and they will resist it.

They will oppose it. They will criticize it. Jesus said they were like petulant children playing in the marketplace.

And he said they were like children who say to their companions, We played the flute for you, and you did not dance. We mourned to you, and you did not lament. Now, what he's talking about here is children who maybe are in a bad mood, and they just won't play with their companions.

And the companions suggest various alternative games to play, even games that are directly opposite to each other to see, Well, you don't like this one. How about this one? Let's see. We'll play the flute, and we can dance.

We can pretend like we're having a celebration, like a party. Oh, you won't dance. Okay, you want to mourn.

Let's play a funeral dirge. Maybe we can pretend like we're at a funeral. Oh, you don't want to do that either.

That's what Jesus is saying. Some children just won't participate in games with their companions. And he says this generation is sort of like that, like children who wouldn't dance when the flute is played and wouldn't mourn when the dirge is played.

These people won't participate in God's kingdom. God sends a man like John whose lifestyle is very severe, like a funeral, and they won't mourn. He calls them to repentance, but they won't repent.

And so he sends Jesus who's like a flutist, like somebody who's inviting them to a party, and they won't come to the party either. They don't like either approach. By the way, you might say, Steve, you're getting a little overboard when you say that Jesus was inviting people to a party, but actually Jesus did say that it was like a party.

In Matthew 22, Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a king who wanted to make a wedding for his son, and he went and invited all the people to the feast. And there were some who wouldn't come because they preferred their livestock or their fields or some other business. And this, of course, made the king angry.

But Jesus was indicating that the invitation to come into the kingdom of God is like an invitation to a party, to a wedding feast, to a wedding celebration. So it is not out of line at all to say that Jesus' style was like the style of the children who say, Listen, we're playing the flute. Why don't you dance? You want to come to our party? You don't want to come to our party? Okay.

How about we'll play a dirge and you can mourn? John the Baptist is that style. Well, it didn't work either way. These people simply were spiritually numb.

These people had no spiritual taste and they would not respond whatever approach was taken by God's messengers. Now, what this illustrates is that there are many times people who will not come to God because they have, or at least they say they have, a particular complaint. But if you remove that complaint, they still won't come.

Their complaints are simply excuses. Now, I see this because, you know, John the Baptist is God's messenger and his lifestyle is a little bit too self-denying for the average Jew. And they say, Nah, that can't be God.

We won't accept that. And so, God says, Okay, you object to that style of life. I'll send Jesus with a different style.

One that you shouldn't object to. And they find something to object to in that too. Now, it seems like it would be hard to object to both.

I mean, I can see how some people prefer a more Spartan style of religious lifestyle than others. And I can see how some would be drawn more to the style that Jesus had. But that someone would reject both and find something to object to in both which suggests that these people are just looking for an excuse to object and not really to respond to God at all.

This is what I have found to be true also of a lot of people. When they hear the gospel today, they will raise an objection that they represent as the reason that they are not going to respond, that they're not going to accept Christ, they're not going to follow Him. And the objection will be of a certain sort which can be easily countered.

Many times an objection against Christianity is in the form of something that is misunderstood. And once things are clarified, the objection is truly removed. And yet, the person will look for another objection.

And I remember I was teaching in Australia back, oh, this must have been about 1982 or 1983. And I was speaking on the authority of Scripture. And after I spoke, one of the young men in the crowd came up to talk to me.

And he said he was not a Christian. He said that he had intellectual objections to Christianity. Well, I had been living in Santa Cruz, California doing street ministry among hippies and university students and all kinds of philosophers who had objections to Christianity.

And apologetics is something I really enjoy. And so I was ready for him to state his objections. And I thought, well, I'll just disabuse this man of his problems, and then we can lead him to the Lord.

So I said, well, what kind of objections do you have? He said, I have intellectual problems with the Bible. I said, well, I've got a little time. Let's hear them.

And so he began to tell me some of the things that he found objectionable in the Bible. Now, the man was not original in the least. By the way, no critic of the Bible is really very original.

All the things that there are to object to in the Bible have been known for 2,000 years and in some cases more. It's not as if some bright critic has recently dug up some evidence against the Bible and said, ah, all those people who believe Christianity all this time have really been in the dark. The fact of the matter is there have been people defending the faith against critics for as long as there's been a Bible.

And many of the objections that modern objectors bring up are the same objections that you'll find written in the church fathers. They knew of them, and they answered them, and more than adequately. If a person has an open mind, it's very easy to answer with a credible and reasonable and plausible answer every objection that people have to the Bible.

I know this because I've been doing it for 30 years, and there truly I can't think of any objection that can't be answered. Now, this young man in Australia shared with me a handful of things about the Bible he objected to, some passages he thought were objectionable or that he thought there were some contradictions here or there. And we talked about them together.

And each time we did, I explained to him what it was that he was misunderstanding and showed him how it was that the passage was really saying this and that and so forth. And in each case, he acknowledged that my explanation was valid and that his objection

really was based on ignorance. And we went through all the objections he raised in that very manner, and one by one, he acknowledged that his objection had been invalid.

Okay, so we got to the end of his objections, and I said, well, how about it? Do you have any other objections? He says, no. I said, would you like to be a Christian then? And he said, no. And I said, well, then you don't have intellectual objections to the Bible.

You just love your sin. And he said, you know, I think you're right. And he left, loving his sin.

Now, we could have saved a lot of time with that young man just by getting him being honest in the first place. The reason he was not a Christian had nothing to do with the things he stated were his objections. His real reason for not being a Christian is he loved sin, and he knew that if he were to embrace Christianity, that it would call him to repent of his sin and to live a life for God, which he had no interest in doing.

And it was in order to make himself think that he had honest reasons to reject Christianity, because it's better for your conscience, you know? If you know that you're rejecting the truth because you love evil, that doesn't really make you feel very good about yourself. It's much better if, in fact, you do love evil, that you convince yourself that it's not evil that you love, but that you have good reason to reject good, and you have good reason to reject the truth, and, you know, it makes you feel better about yourself. And that's what he was doing, of course, and that's what many people do.

They raise objection after objection, which is their way of saying, I am right to reject this Christianity. But, in fact, the real reason they reject it is because they do not want to submit to God. They are rebels against God, and they want to stay rebels against God.

And that was the problem with Jesus' generation. That's the point he was making. They can raise any objection they want to, but if they object that the messenger is too ascetic, well, then let's send on a messenger who's not ascetic.

Oh, well, they object to him too. They say he's too freewheeling. He's too much of a friend of sinners.

I see. Well, we're starting to see what's really making these people tick. It's the excuses, I should say, the reasons they give are nothing other than excuses.

They really have another reason for rejecting the gospel. They put forward a reason as if it is the reason that they reject it, because they somewhat believe it themselves. That is, many people have never even searched their own hearts to find out why it is that they do not follow Jesus Christ.

They know of him. They really can't think of anything truly wrong with him, but they just don't want to follow him. Why not? Well, he's God, and he commands us to follow him.

What good reason can we give for not following him? Well, there aren't any good reasons, but there's a whole lot of bad reasons, and people like to collect them sometimes. And they give the reasons as if those are their real reasons. And some of them have never really even searched their own hearts to realize that their real reason for not following Jesus is that they don't want to.

They don't like him. They don't like what he will require of them. They have lived their lives as rebels against God, and they're not willing to stop doing that yet.

If that's you, then the most I can do for you is let you know that that's what you are. I can't really answer your objections in such a way as to get you to become a Christian, because once I've answered all your objections, you'll still have your basic reason for not being a Christian. I can't change that.

If you love your sin, you can't love God, because God hates sin, and your sin is that which separates you from God. And you may make a great number of excuses. Certainly, making excuses for rejecting the gospel is not new.

It's nothing modern. Jesus found his own generation doing the very same thing. But the excuses were very lame, and the excuses today are very lame as well.

Anyone who really loves the truth and really wants the truth, and is willing to give up a life of sin in order to know the truth, can easily find very satisfying answers to those things that they originally or earlier found as problems in the Bible and with Christianity. And anyone who will humbly turn to God and say, God, it may cost me everything I love in the world, but this world is passing away. It may call me to repent of my cherished sins, but these sins are killing me and separating me from you.

Whatever it may cost me, I'm going to follow Jesus Christ, because that I know is truth. That I know is right, and I'll stop making excuses. And I will follow you no matter what it takes, until death, and faithfully so.

That is the kind of attitude that gets people from damned to saved. You make that transition with that attitude. It's not by trying to raise every kind of objection.

Say, I'm really honest. I'm just rejecting Christianity for honest difficulties. That's not generally true.

If it is, if you think it is, write to me. I'll be glad to answer your difficulties. Until then, come back again tomorrow.

We'll talk about this some more.