

Rejecting Grace

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Well, let me welcome you to this Lunchtime Bible Talk. Now, we started last week this short series in Matthew 11 and 12, which I call the Kingdom Advancing.

Jesus is getting into the second stage of his ministry now, if you like. And the kingdom is both being accepted and rejected. And we're going to read Matthew chapter 11, verses 20 to 30.

The previous week, previous part of the chapter, Jesus had given testimony to John the Baptist, and authenticated John, as John had earlier authenticated Jesus.

And now we continue in verse 20, page 816 in the Church Bibles. Then Jesus began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sack cloth and ashes.

[1 : 10] But I tell you, it would be more bearable in the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you, and you, Capernaum. Will you be exalted to heaven? You'll be brought down to Hades.

For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you, it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.

At that time, Jesus declared, Lord, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth. You have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son.

And anyone whom a Son chooses to reveal to him, come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

[2 : 13] Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Lord God, we draw aside for these moments from the busyness and activity of our lives, from the good things and the bad things, from the everyday and from the unusual, and we ask that in these moments you will speak to us, that we may indeed experience what the Lord Jesus said in these verses, that he is gentle and lowly in heart, and we will find rest for our souls.

Lord, strengthen us, strengthen us, Lord. Keep us always faithful to you. And may we indeed know your presence and your love and your power throughout these moments and in the days to come. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I don't know the kind of things that irritate you, but all of us get irritated, and don't pretend that you don't.

One of the things that irritates me is people who are dogmatic about absolutely everything, including the unimportant. You'll say to them, it's a warm day.

[3 : 44] Oh, no, it's not warm at all. They'll tell you at election time that there's only one possible party you can vote for. Or they'll tell you there's only one kind of food that's healthy, and so on.

You know the kind of person I mean. And do you know how easy it is for all of us to fall into this, to become stubborn, to become pig-headed, and simply disagree?

You know the kind of person. The kind of person who, if you want to get them on your side, if you want them to agree to something, then condemn it. And then they, of course, will have to do the opposite and take the contrary view.

But there are things in life where it is hugely important to make the right decision. It's very important to make the right decision in relationships, especially in the marriage relationship.

And above all, it's very important not to be neutral about Jesus and his claims. Jesus isn't coming, advancing a kind of way of life, a philosophy, which we can accept or reject.

[5 : 02] Ultimately, the gospel is not about Jesus. Ultimately, the gospel is Jesus. Now, of course, that can be carried too far, and people can say, oh, well, why bother about the Bible then?

The point is, without the Bible and the guidance of the Spirit, we won't know who Jesus is. He'll simply become a projection of our fantasies. And so it is here.

Jesus is saying to people, you've got to make a decision. Later on in chapter 16, he is going to say to the disciples, who do you see that I am?

And Peter, of course, gives the great confession, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. But not everybody believed that then, and not everybody believes that now.

And Jesus is showing us how the realities of the kingdom affects people, either for or against. I say, in many areas of life, in politics, in choice of career, all kind of hobbies, all these sort of things.

[6 : 08] We can change our mind. We can accept or reject. Jesus is saying, you have to come to a decision about me. An old hymn that I don't hear sung now at all, you said, what think you of Christ is the test.

To try both your state and your scheme, you cannot be right in the rest, unless you think rightly of him. And that's very much the atmosphere of this passage.

And you'll notice that it falls into two very clear sections. First of all, there is stern condemnation, and then there is gentle invitation.

These are the two main sections. First of all, stern condemnation in lines 20 to 24. Jesus has said back in 18, what shall I compare this generation?

And generation there, as I said last week, not exclusively old, young, or middle-aged, but all the people who happened to be alive at that particular time.

[7 : 13] And he's disappointed, bitterly disappointed with them, because they're like children playing games. Nothing pleases them. Now, this time, this generation, his condemnation has become very, he began to denounce a word, a very, very strong word, very strong indignation.

Now, why does he select these places, Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum? That's because, back in chapters 8 and 9, these cities had been the scene of great miracles.

Twelve-year-old girl, the daughter of the synagogue ruler, where Jairus had been raised from the dead. The blind had been, the blind eyes had been opened.

Other wonderful things had happened. These people had seen that happening. And that's why it's wrong to say that if miraculous events happen, people won't necessarily believe, because they could always be explained in different ways.

And he says, if the mighty were being done in Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon are mentioned often in the Old Testament, denounced by the prophets for their self-indulgence, their greed, their economic capacity, and all the rest of it.

[8 : 32] And Ezekiel 28, to talk about the prince of Tyre, who said, in your pride you say, I am a god. And he had talked about Sidon as malicious neighbors, painful briars, and sharp thorns.

And Sodom, of course, a symbol of God's judgment back in the book of Genesis when Sodom and Gomorrah had been destroyed by God's judgment. So, this is the, it's a very telling and very cutting phrase that's used.

You are worse, he says, than Tyre and Sidon. Now, miracles, as I say, don't lead to repentance in themselves. Back in the 1980s, there was a man called John Wimber who wrote a book called Power Evangelism.

Now, there's some good things in that book, but the argument that, the argument that he made was that if the gospel were accompanied by healing miracles and so on, such as it was in the time of Jesus, people would repent.

There's a fundamental mistake there. There's two fundamental mistakes. One is that many people did not repent when they saw such miracles and the same happened in the Acts of the Apostles.

[9 : 52] I mean, when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, we don't read the Jewish leaders then said, we'll take this man seriously now. What did we read?

They went away and wanted to kill him. And the other serious error that he made was that the gospel word is not something accompanied by the power of God.

The gospel word is the power of God. It's what Paul says in Romans, I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.

Now, I'm not denouncing miracles. Miracles did happen then. Miracles still happen now. But that is not the point. If God chooses, and he sometimes does, to work dramatically, then great.

But we mustn't assume that if he's not working in that way that nothing is happening at all. The gospel itself, the word of God and the power of the spirit of God, is what converts people.

[10:53] The other thing is, Jesus had perfect knowledge, not only of people's hearts, but of how they would have acted in other circumstances. And he is, basically he's saying that not only do you not believe, there is just no place and no circumstances in which you would believe.

Your unbelief has become invincible. That's what he's saying. The other thing is, different people at different times are given different opportunities. The key is how they respond to the light that is given.

Now, if people attend a church regularly where the gospel is clearly preached, they have a greater responsibility than those who attend the church where the gospel is preached in a muddled and confused way or perhaps not preached at all.

In other words, the more people understand, the greater their responsibility. After all, the Lord knows the hearts of people. Paul says in Romans 1 again that if the people can see from the created order itself, imagine a pagan who has never heard of Jesus, never heard of the word, never heard the gospel, looks up at the night sky and thinks, there must be someone greater than me who made that and who tries then to live his life in that understanding.

Where are we to say that the grace of God cannot reach out there as well? I think that's so important. People are given different opportunities. Some people are given very great opportunities as these people were.

[12:47] Others are not given such great opportunities. It's the way we respond to the light we are given. There are examples of the kind of thing I mention where people at a later stage have been, when they've met someone who knows the Lord, they've been led into a deeper understanding of the truth.

There's a stern denunciation, a realization that if the word of God is clearly manifested, clearly revealed, and it's not accepted, then the inevitable judgment.

Now we have a gentle invitation, 25 to 30. Now, Matthew has obviously placed these sections together. They belong together and they're both needed.

You see, if we simply have the denunciation without the invitation, that is not gospel. That's not the fullness of the gospel.

That's legalism. That is preaching judgment without gospel. On the other hand, if we have the invitation without showing people that they're neat, that's not the gospel either.

[14:01] And that's one of our problems nowadays, of course. There's people don't particularly realize their need. You see, there's no point in going up to your average person and saying, do you want to have Jesus in your life?

God, that is persecutor. Why? I don't see why. It's going on perfectly well already. That's not, of course, how the New Testament does its evangelism.

New Testament doesn't say, would you like to have Jesus in your life? New Testament says, you're going to meet Jesus whether you want to or not. And one day, he is going to be your judge.

That's, if you like, the first section. The next bit, which makes it gospel, is the good news is before that. He has come to prepare you for that judgment.

He's given you this gentle invitation. And we have the true response to Jesus. How to receive him. Now, at that time, is a generalized phrase that is often used.

[15:04] and although it's not mentioned here, Luke says that Jesus spoke these words when the disciples returned from mission.

The disciples were sent out on mission. They came back thrilled. Wonderful things were happening. People were believing. Blind eyes were being opened. And they were carrying out, say, the ministry of Jesus himself.

And so Jesus is saying here that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.

Now, in many ways, of course, we mustn't exaggerate this. After all, wisdom and understanding are good gifts. The Bible tells of the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom to encourage us to have understanding.

What's being contrasted here though is the proud and arrogant human thinking that denies God, that rejects the gospel, and the acceptance of little children.

[16:14] I mean, we're not called in always to be like little children. I mean, little children are not just delightful. Little children are very selfish, obviously.

If the first few years of your life, you're brought up to believe the world revolves around you. That's obviously going to trouble. Some people never grow out of that. But it's talking about the glad, the trusting of a child, except you receive these things as a little child.

And it's not, wisdom and understanding is not here about education. It's not here about what qualifications you have. Wisdom and understanding is the fool who, in Psalm 14, the fool has said in his heart, there is no God.

There are many such fools in the world today who are intellectually very, very clever indeed. We know that. So it's not intellectual capacity, it's unwillingness to accept grace.

You see, if I think I can make it on my own, I'm not going to accept grace. I'm not going to come to Jesus because I think I can make it on my own.

[17:35] Nothing I do can merit God's favor. We'll sing in a few moments, just as I am, without one plea, but your blood was shed for me. That is what it's about.

So we receive Jesus as a little child receives Jesus. And who is it that we receive? Verses 27 and 28 is vastly important because if we accept Jesus, we accept God.

If we reject Jesus, we reject God. There is no way to God that bypasses Jesus. There is no knowledge of God that has a ring root around Calvary and so on.

We need to accept Jesus. and any other way is just a kind of vague mysticism. All things have been and no one knows the Son except the Father.

No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. The style of this is actually very much more like John's gospel than like Matthew's gospel, but that's not a problem because obviously the different gospel writers present different aspects of Jesus.

[18:50] And remember in John Jesus says, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me. Now some people try and get around that and say, well we may not be able to come to the Father but we can come to God in some other aspect.

Now that is simply not true because Jesus is the full revelation of God. There is no other God behind Jesus whom we can find out and bypass Jesus.

Now as I say, some people who haven't heard the name of Jesus after all believed in him without knowing who they're believing in. The entire Old Testament believers were in that category.

These all died in faith, not having received the promises but having seen them in the distance. I think that's so important. I've often said this from this lectern that the Old Testament and the New Testament believers are one people of God who came to God by faith.

The difference is that we look back at Calvary, we look forward to Calvary. After all, if the death of Christ can save us thousands of years afterwards, it could also save those thousands of years before.

[20:09] So the emphasis is on Jesus' authority. Who is it that we're receiving? We're receiving the living God himself who came into our world, who became one of us without ceasing to be one with God.

And what does he offer? Verses 28 to third, come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden.

Matthew is the only gospel who actually includes these words, echoing Jeremiah where we're told God will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint.

and Isaiah as well as wait on the Lord will renew their strength, mount up with wings as eagles. The Jeremiah passage builds up to saying God will make a new covenant.

And that, of course, is happening in these very days. Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Rest now and rest in the future. I am gentle and lowly in heart. As opposed to many of their teachers, many of the scribes and Pharisees were extremely arrogant and Jesus has condemned them already for loving to strut about in long robes, have the chief seats in the synagogues, and the greetings in the marketplace.

[21:31] And the greetings, of course, were not just saying hello. The greetings were a kind of deferential greeting to these people. Now, take my yoke.

yoke is, of course, a metaphor of discipleship. Now, the point is, it's not that Jesus makes less demands than their teachers did, but after all, he said back in the Sermon on the Mount, unless you're righteous to succeed that of the Pharisees and scribes, you will not enter the kingdom of

heaven.

Which does not mean that we have to try as hard as we possibly can to be more righteous than them. What he's saying is their righteousness is simply superficial.

It's all about rules and regulations, outward behavior, these kind of things. It's legalism. It's not true grace. But here, he says, my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Now, there are many times, of course, in the Christian life when we feel anything but the yoke being easy and the burden is light. And I think we've got to remember, when we're thinking about the Christian life, we've got to hold various things in tension.

[22 : 46] One is, take up your cross and follow me. And the other, my yoke is easy and my burden is light. It's the grace of God.

See, if you live in a community which is totally ridden by rules and regulations. In many ways, it's very easy.

You don't have to make any decisions. Every possible angle is covered. But on the other hand, it's stifling. People don't grow, people don't develop, people become stern, disapproving, inward-looking.

Whereas, in the kingdom of grace, in spite of faults, in spite of failures, people grow more like Jesus. So you see, both the stern condemnation and the gentle invitation, they are part of the gospel.

And Jesus, when he utters these denunciations, also makes the invitation. And that is the pattern. That is a pattern throughout the Bible.

[23 : 55] The wages of sin is death. That's pretty awful. But the gift of God is eternal life. The wages, in other words, we get what we work for, sin, whereas the gift of God is eternal life.

And there is the danger of back in verses 16 and 17, complaining about Jesus and complaining about John. That can easily become outright rejection.

As I said last week, this is rejecting the gospel when it comes from someone you don't like in a style you don't like. Now, obviously, as I said at the beginning of the talk, we all find certain people irritating.

There are people who find certain preachers irritating. I know that, and you know that. But that's not the point. The point is not the individual. The point is the message.

And above all, accepting Jesus is a relationship. Come unto me, I am gentle and lowly in heart. It's ultimately about a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

[25 : 06] It involves the mind. We have to understand what we're doing. It involves the emotions. We have to be convinced that we're wrong. But above all, it involves the will, the whole person.

When Jesus calls us, he calls us as whole people. Never very happy about that phrase. I don't hear it so much nowadays, soul winning.

We're not just souls. We are people. Jesus Christ did not and does not call souls. He calls people. And he calls them by name.

And that's what this passage is saying. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, we tremble at the condemnation.

But we thank you for the gentle invitation. Not just an invitation. That's true at the beginning of our Christian life. But an invitation that continues with us.

[26 : 03] A truth about Jesus Christ. It is not just true when we come to him by faith. As we come to him daily. In that same repentance and faith. And we pray we may experience that more and more.

In his name. Amen. Amen. Here for a time. And then above. Father, until that day dawns, we pray that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit will be with us all.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.