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Matthew 11:15-19 “Unresponsive People”

Intro. Do you realize that unresponsiveness is a recognized symptom in the medical community? Unresponsiveness refers to how the patient responds to questions or other stimuli. Poor response or total loss of response can indicate various serious brain infections or disorders. Any type of high fever, with numerous causes, can also cause poor response. Poor responsiveness needs immediate professional medical advice for prompt diagnosis and treatment.¹

Well I want you to know that being unresponsive to the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a symptom of a serious spiritual condition. If you can hear Gospel preaching and other Gospel presentations time and time, and yet remain unmoved, and unrepentant, and unbelieving, then you are desperate need of divine intervention before it is too late.

Many people in Jesus’ day faced the same problem. At this point in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus Christ has been teaching and preaching Word of God for well over a year. It should have been very clear that He had fulfilled many Messianic prophecies. When John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus, questioning if He were the Messiah, Jesus said in vv. 4-5, “Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: ‘The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them.’” Jesus was basically quoting Old Testament prophecies there.

Yet in spite of the fact that John the Baptist fulfilled prophecies concerning the forerunner of the Messiah, and in spite of the fact that Jesus preached & did miracles in clear fulfillment of prophecy, many people in Israel remained unresponsive. As v.20 indicates, many did not repent at the preaching of Jesus. They were unmoved and uncommitted to Jesus. Few were openly confessing Him as Messiah. This prompted Jesus to speak the words of our text.

I wonder if today’s generation is very similar to the generation in Jesus’ day. I wonder how many who are hearing me today are like the people of Jesus’ day. You have heard me and others preach the Gospel many times. You have heard about Jesus many times. You’ve heard about His miracles, His death on the Cross, and even His resurrection. And yet, you remain uncommitted. You haven’t made a profession of faith. You haven’t been baptized. You remain uncommitted to a local church. You do not take a public stand for Jesus at work, school, or elsewhere. You would like to believe you are somewhere in the middle. You are not against Jesus, but you are not openly taking a stand for Jesus. Friend, there is no middle ground when it comes to Jesus.

So if you have been unresponsive to date, what is it going to take to get you to join the company of the faithful? What would God have to do to get you to move from being a watcher and listener, to a committed disciple of Jesus Christ? Well let’s find out from the words of Jesus this morning. I want you to notice first of all:

I. CONSIDER THE EXPRESSIONS OF GOD’S APPEAL

Man has a sin problem. Sin will ruin your life, and it will send you to a devil’s hell. God has provided an answer to our sin problem. Furthermore, He has sent many messengers to mankind,

¹ <http://www.wrongdiagnosis.com/symptom/unresponsive.htm>

telling us what we must do to be saved from our sin. He sent many prophets. Two of the most important ones are mentioned in my text today. Jesus talked about:

A. John the Baptist – He also talked about him in the previous context. In v.11 Jesus said that John was the greatest prophet to date. He attracted big crowds, and many did respond to his message. He was a fire ball preacher. He was a man of conviction and courage. He preached hard against sin. As God's voice to the people, he had pressed upon them the divine requirements of turning from their evil ways and bearing good fruit. He told the people to repent of their sins, and turn in faith to the Messiah, who was soon to come. He warned of hell. He pressed upon the people that they should repent now before they are cast into hell.

Since John demanded repentance of his followers, he gave up many pleasures himself. As Jesus said in v.18, "John came neither eating nor drinking." John lived an austere life of self-denial. He fasted every week. He lived on a simple diet of locust made tolerable with honey. Like a Nazarite, he did not drink any kind of drink from grapes. He shunned fashionable clothes and nice houses. He was serious and stern, and God used him to prepare the people for an even greater prophet:

B. Jesus - Jesus also demanded repentance and a change of life. He could preach just as hard against sin. But in other ways Jesus was different from John the Baptist. For example:

1. He Came Eating & Drinking – That is what Jesus said of Himself in v.19. He knew how to enjoy a good meal on a regular basis. He rarely fasted, though He prayed often. He presented to the world the ideal kind of life that God intended for us. It is not the suppression of God-given earthly satisfactions and pleasures. Rather, we are most like the Master when we enjoy the good things of life. The highest type of religion includes the acceptance of all pure material blessings with thanksgiving and praise. Asceticism is an inferior form of spirituality.

Yet, He always kept desires for food and drink under control. Even though He was accused of being a glutton, that was a false charge. Don't use this verse to excuse gluttony in your own life! It is an error to quote Christ's example as a cover for excess, and grasping at material enjoyments which are not innocent in themselves, or are mixed up with much that is sinful. Furthermore, He always subordinated food & drink to loftier purposes. He fasted for 40 days and nights at the beginning of His ministry. In John 4:31-32 we see where the disciples encouraged Jesus to eat. But Jesus said, "I have food to eat of which you do not know." Then he said in v.34, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work."

Now the main point is that in Jesus, God was showing that He is no kill joy. Coming to Jesus does not mean that you have to give up all pleasures, but only the sinful pleasures which are only temporary, and actually destructive. So isn't Jesus someone you can listen to?

But there is more here about the appeal of God through Jesus. We see in the last of v.19:

2. He Was a Friend of Sinners – Though meant in derision, this was a true statement when understood properly. He was the best Friend sinners ever had, for He came into the world to save sinners. Furthermore, Jesus was friendly. He mixed and mingled with the common people, even including tax collectors and sinners like the harlots that came to hear Him. Jesus visited in their homes, sat at their tables, and ate their food. He conformed to their way of life—but He did not partake of their sins. People observed a mutual attraction between Jesus and tax collectors and sinners; that harlots as well as little children seemed to be drawn to Him. There was a mysterious sense of sympathy which drew Jesus Christ to these poor people and their deep need drew them to Him. And Jesus welcomes them because He knows that He bears in Himself a power that will

cleanse the foulest and raise the most fallen. His hope for outcasts is boundless, because He knows that every sin can be cleansed by His precious blood.

Oh, that such sinners were so drawn to our churches! Christianity should know nothing of desperate cases. There should be no incurables as far as we are concerned, but our hope should be as boundless as the Master's, who drew to Himself the publicans and sinners, and made them saints. Friend, always remember that Jesus is a friend of sinners. No matter what you have done, or how much you have fallen, you can come to Him. He will forgive you. He will cleanse you. He will create a new life within you. He will lift you up and give you a fresh start in life.

What a contrast Jesus was to the religious leaders of His day. The Pharisees had nothing to do with such sinners. It would have been a long while before any sinful men would have found their way to these self-righteous hypocrites. But the great love of Jesus drew guilty sinners to Himself.

But the problem is that many Pharisees are still with us. Brethren! If the Church begins to lose its care for, and its power of drawing outcasts and sinners, it has begun to lose its hold on Christ. The Friend of publicans and sinners has set the example to all of us His followers.

So what have you done with the loving appeal of God through Jesus? How have you responded to bold preachers like John the Baptist? Well that leads to my second point:

II. DON'T BE UNRESPONSIVE TO GOD'S APPEAL

I believe that God uses different kind of preachers to reach different kind of people. The God of heaven uses a variety of means and methods for the conversion of lost souls. He wants all people to be saved, and therefore leaves no stone unturned in order to reach them. God's ministers are variously gifted: the ability and genius of some lie one way, of others, another way. Therefore we ought not to condemn either, but to praise God for both. For example, some respond to the fiery preaching of a John the Baptist. Other people are reached by the ministry of a man like Jesus. That is why the apostle Paul learned to be all things to all men, as he stated in 1 Cor. 9:22. He would adapt his preaching approach and manner of life depending on the audience he was trying to reach.

But Jesus grieves over the fact that most of His generation, especially the leaders, did not respond positively to anything! They listened to John the Baptist and did nothing. They listened to Jesus and did nothing. They continued in unbelief and obstinacy. They sat or stood, unmoved, like a knot on a log. Again, it was mainly the leaders, like the Pharisees and the law-experts, that rejected the messengers God sent to them. The people who are in most danger of frustrating God's gracious purpose were not men and women sinking in the stagnant pool of sensuous sin; but respectable synagogue-going, sermon-hearing, critical Pharisees. The most hopeless person is the man who has been afflicted with the demon of complacent self-righteousness. I wonder if there are any sitting in these pews today, who have heard men preaching for years, and has never done anything to respond to their message?

So in their rejection of John the Baptist & Jesus, they diverted attention away from their own sinful rejection, and made several false accusations. Both John and Jesus had become the butt of their disparaging and disrespectful remarks. For example, some accused John the Baptist of being demon possessed! (v.18). They imputed his strictness and reservedness to some kind of a demon possession. Some even accused Jesus of being a glutton and a winebibber (v.19). That was an exaggeration. Jesus enjoyed good food, but He was not a glutton or a winebibber. They also accused Him of being a friend of tax collectors and sinners! And they used "friend" in a sinister sense, implying that Jesus was the comrade of the worst characters, and like them in conduct. They

no doubt said, “Ah! You can tell what sort of a man He is by the company he keeps.”

Now the main point of this text is to rebuke the unresponsiveness of so many people to the various preachers of the Gospel that God sends to us. So Jesus illustrates the unresponsiveness of people in vv.16-17, “But to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions, and saying: ‘We played the flute for you, And you did not dance; We mourned to you, And you did not lament.’” It is clear that Jesus is here accusing these critics of being childish. They were like children playing in a marketplace. The markets spoken of here were open places primarily. It was at these market places the children gathered to play. They came with their parents, some probably from quite a distance; and some of them did not see other children often except at the market places.

I want to bring our Lord’s illustration more up to date. Now we all know that it is very common for children to imitate grown people. Have you every played “keeping house” or “doctor” with a group of children? Cheryl used to play “church” with her sister & best friend. So imagine a group of children playing one day. One of them says, “Let’s play wedding.” Some of the kids agree to go along. So the leaders start appointing different ones to play the parts of the groom, the bride, the preacher, and the wedding singer. But some of the kids scream back in disgust, “Not that silly stuff. That’s not for us.” “Then let’s play funeral,” says the boy who had been the first to suggest playing wedding, and he adds, “I’ll be the funeral director, the pallbearers are John, Bert, Peter, and Larry. Mike, you lay down & be the corpse. Cheryl, you be the singer.” Dolefully the speaker and some others begin to sing a funeral hymn. But their groaning is drowned out by loud protests: “Cut it out. We want none of this sad stuff.” So a petty quarrel develops. In a spirit of desperation they then scold their playmates for being so uncooperative. “You’re never satisfied. You don’t want to play wedding and you don’t want to play funeral. What do you want to play?” It seems that all are unhappy, disgruntled, sulky. Nothing suited them. That’s just like children, isn’t it? If the play suggestion doesn’t suit them, they drop out and refuse to play at all.

So Jesus is saying, “That is the way you critics are behaving. You are never satisfied. You used to be filled with enthusiasm about John; at least, you stood in awe of him and did not find fault with his stern austerity and call to repentance. But after a while, you weren’t pleased with John.” Then Jesus continued, “I used a different approach. I ate at your table, and socialized with anyone, but you were not pleased with Me either. Now you are turning against Me. You cannot be pleased; you are fickle, inconsistent, abusive, stubborn, and hardhearted.”

Application: Likewise, today nothing seems to succeed. There are some folk that you simply cannot please. They don’t like one preacher because he just stands up there and in a monotone gives his sermon. Then the next preacher they don’t like because he is very loud, demonstrative, and pounds the pulpit. Or one is too profound, and they don’t understand him, and the other is too simple—so they don’t like him either. Some say the preacher is too young, and some of the same people say he is too old. There are a lot of people whom no one can please, and that was certainly true in our Lord’s day.

The attitude and the spirit displayed by the people showed a determined opposition to the messengers of God, and to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Don’t let that be true of you. Instead, I want to share with you my final main point:

III. BE WISE: LISTEN TO THE GOSPEL & RESPOND!

Jesus concludes this text with a seemingly strange saying in v.19, “But wisdom is justified of her children.” God’s wisdom has planned the different conduct of both John and Jesus. He does

not wish all to be just alike in everything. Consider the wisdom of John the Baptist, when he insisted on repentance, and of Jesus, when he held out the hope of salvation, even to those with whom many in Israel would have nothing to do. Though many rejected the Gospel, or were unresponsive to the Gospel, the changed lives of those who did respond justifies the wisdom of God in the choice of these means. Furthermore, not only was God's approach in presenting the Gospel wise, but the gospel itself is wisdom from above, and true believers are born again by it. The cure of every patient, that observes the physician's orders, justifies the wisdom of the physician. In other words, the proof is in the pudding. Such wisdom was shown to have been fully justified by what it actually accomplished in the hearts and lives of those who gave the proper response to both of these preachers.

One time there was an atheist & a preacher before a large crowd. The atheist challenged the preacher to a debate. The preacher agreed on the condition that the atheist finds 100 people who have been led to believe in atheism, and whose lives have been transformed for the better, and who have had a positive impact upon other people. Then the preacher said he would go and find 100 Christians whose lives have been transformed for the better, and who have become a positive force for good in society. Then, he would debate. The atheist knew he could not meet that challenge, and the debate was over before it began.² Therefore, as the apostle Paul said, I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, because it is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16).

Furthermore, it takes wisdom on your part to make the right choice today. Wisdom's children (v.19) are all those who were wise enough to take to heart the message of John and of Jesus. So you can be wise, or you can be foolish regarding the most important decisions in life. And *the* most important decision in life is this: What are you going to do with the message of Jesus Christ? Let me tell you with wise course of action. First:

A. Listen to Jesus – In v.15 He said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” This is a command that Jesus repeated many times.³ Listen attentively to the message of salvation. Millions are so foolish to ignore the message of the two greatest prophets who have ever lived. And Jesus Christ was not just a prophet; He was the Son of God, who died for our sins, and rose from the grave.

We also need to listen to the warnings of Scripture. Already the Lord began to toll the bell for the Jewish nation. Its day of judgment was fast approaching. The Lord had accurately assessed the turn of the tide. He had weighed the nation in the balance and found it wanting. But would they listen to His warnings? Most did not. The nation was destroyed by the Romans about 40 years later. Millions went out into a Christless eternity. Ah, but some did listen. They were saved from the righteous judgment of God.

Will you listen to Jesus? Will you listen to His offer of salvation, and His warnings of judgment? 2 Tim. 3:15 says that the Holy Scriptures “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” Will you listen attentively to the voice of God in Scripture?

Back when the telegraph was the fastest method of long-distance communication, a young man applied for a job as a Morse Code operator. Answering an ad in the newspaper, he went to the office that was listed. When he arrived, he entered a large, busy office filled with noise and clatter, including the sound of a telegraph in the background. A sign on the receptionist's counter instructed job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned to enter the inner

² Spiros Zodhiates, *Conquering the Fear of Death: An Exposition of 1 Corinthians 15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 809.

³ Mt. 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; 8:18; Luke 8:8, 18; 14:35; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 13:9.

office. The young man filled out his form and sat down with the seven other applicants in the waiting area.

After a few minutes, the young man stood up, crossed the room to the door of the inner office, and walked right in. Naturally, the other applicants perked up, wondering what was going on. They hadn't heard any summons yet, and they assumed the young man had made a mistake and would be disqualified. Within a few minutes, however, the employer came out and told the other applicants that the job had been filled. They began grumbling, and one spoke up, saying: "Wait a minute. He was the last to come in, and we never got a chance to be interviewed. That's not fair!" The employer replied: "I'm sorry, but for the last several minutes, while you've been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message: "If you understand this message, then come right in. The job is yours." None of you heard it or understood it. This young man did. The job is his.

There is a lot of noise and clatter in this world, clamoring for our attention. Yet in the background, God is talking to us, constantly sending us messages. Are you listening to God, or are you ignoring what He is saying? It will make a difference in your life now, and where you will spend eternity.⁴

But listening is not enough. The wise course of action is also to:

B. Respond to Jesus - In Mt. 7:24 Jesus said, "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock." In Mt. 25 Jesus told the parable of the 10 virgins. He said in v.2, "Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish." The wise ones thought ahead and took oil with them for their lamps. They were ready for the bridegroom, but the foolish ones were not. They waited until it was too late to try to get oil for their lamps. Even so, if you wait about making a decision to commit your life to Christ, you are being foolish. You could die, or Jesus could come back, or your heart could grow Gospel hardened, and you will never be saved!

Do you know what's going to happen to you if you don't respond to the voice of God, calling you to repent of sin, & believe in His Son Jesus? You are going to grow dull of hearing. You may never be saved! Some of you have lived near a railroad crossing. Houses and apartments tend to cost less there. Do you remember your first night in that house or apartment? A train would come by in the middle of the night, blasting its horn. It would wake you up, and just about give you a heart attack! But after a while, you started getting used to the nightly awakenings. You would wake up for a few seconds, then go right back to sleep. Eventually you got to where the train horn didn't even wake you anymore. The same process occurs when God speaks to our hearts and we don't respond. Eventually, we stop hearing His voice because our hearts have become hard. That is why Heb. 4:7 says, "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts."⁵

Conclusion: Have you been unresponsive to the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Have you been a listener of the Word, but not a doer of the Word? Well it is time to respond! Don't let another minute pass without making the wisest and most important decision in your life. God has spoken through the glory of His creation. God has spoken through many prophets, including John the Baptist & Jesus. He has spoken through the Scriptures. He continues to speak through preachers & Christian believers today. Listen to His voice. Your life depends upon it. Don't be unresponsive. Repent of your sins. Believe in His Son Jesus Christ. Openly confess Christ as Savior. Follow Him in baptism

⁴ Author unknown Via *Verse A Week Club*.

⁵ Adapted from Kent Crockett's Sermon Illustrations, www.kentcrockett.com in Pulpit Helps, April 2005, p. 28.

and committed discipleship. Trust God, and He will help you make the wisest decision of your life. Do it now! Don't delay another moment.

Sources: Oliver B. Greene, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Vol. 3, (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1971); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); John Philips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. I (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).