

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:
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Matthew 11:20-28 “Those Who See No Need to Repent”

Intro. Not long after Jesus was baptized, He began His great Galilean ministry. Matt. 4:23 describes His ministry saying, “And Jesus was going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people.” Notice that no disease was immune from His healing power. Yea, even death could not resist His power!

Well, after more than a year of performing such miracles in the cities of Galilee, most of the people still had not changed. Few had truly repented. So Christ preached a harsh message of condemnation against the people of the cities of Galilee where He performed most of His miracles. That is the subject of my text this morning.

Have you ever said to yourself, “If I would have seen Jesus and heard Him teach, and seen His miracles, I would be more dedicated to Christ”? Or, “I would be a Christian.” That is not necessarily so. The people of Capernaum heard Christ teach and saw many of His miracles, and yet they did not repent of their sins. Also, the Jews said, “If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in shedding the blood of the prophets” (Mt. 23:30). And yet some of those same people killed the greatest prophet of all, Jesus Christ. If you are not a believer and living for the Lord, the problem is not due to the fact that you’ve never seen Jesus or a miracle. The problem is not a head problem but a heart problem. So often we make excuses, claiming that if our *circumstances* were different, *we* would be different. But that is usually not the case. What would it take to get us to quit *playing* church, and to get serious about our relationship to the Lord? If the Lord performed a miracle through me before your eyes, would you change the way you are living? Probably not for long. Listen, the time to get right with God is now; the time to repent is now! Don’t wait until some great earthquake hits. Don’t wait until some great preacher comes to town. All of you need to make sure you are saved, that your sins are forgiven, and that you are really living for God. And if you’re not saved and living for God, I believe this text teaches that it is not due to your circumstance; it is not a lack of information. Our main problem is a heart problem. So to help us avoid the same mistakes the people of Galilee made, let’s examine this passage of Scripture together. Consider first of all:

I. THE GREAT SIN OF UNREPENTANCE IS IDENTIFIED

Here Jesus singles out the cities where most of his mighty works were done. He mentions 3 cities in particular. Chorazin and Bethsaida were towns not very far from Capernaum, all on or near the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Chorazin was one of the cities in which most of His mighty works were done (yet we have no account of His work there). Bethsaida was the home town of Philip, the place where Andrew and Peter also originally came from (Jn. 1:44). Christ also upbraids Capernaum. In Mt. 9:1 it is called “His own city,” where he settled after He left Nazareth. Five of the ten miracles recorded in Matthew 8-9 were performed in Capernaum. In fact, some of Jesus' most



outstanding miracles were performed at Capernaum: the healing of the nobleman's son, the healing of the demoniac in the synagogue, the healing of the centurion's servant, the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, the healing of the paralytic, the raising from the dead of Jairus' daughter, the healing of the woman with the issue of blood, the healing of the two blind men and the mute demoniac, etc. So these cities were highly favored in having Jesus perform so many miracles. But all was not well with Him.

A. The Indications of a Problem - Two words indicate the seriousness of the problem. Notice in v. 20 that Jesus began "to rebuke the cities...." The meaning of rebuke very literally is that He reproached them. *Odeidizo* means to reproach, upbraid. Here it refers to a justifiable reproach. Jesus is quite capable of being stern, severe. Christ first invites, but when His invitations are slighted, then He upbraids. There is such a thing as the wrath of the Lamb, even though that description seems to contradict itself.

Then in v. 21 He began to pronounce woes upon those cities. "Woe" is from *ouai* - an interjection denoting pain, grief, or displeasure, "woe, alas!" As a substantive it means calamity. Here Christ warns of pain, grief, and calamity that are to fall upon the people of these cities. So here we see a side of Jesus that many preachers do not talk about. Yes, Jesus was gentle, kind, compassionate, and loving. But He also could be stern, severe, and judgmental toward destructive sin.

So what had these privileged cities done to merit such rebuke, and warning of woe? Let's see:

B. The Indictment Given – What had they done to deserve such harsh rebuke? From this text we see that we likewise merit rebuke from Jesus Christ when we make the same 2 mistakes:

1. We Fail to Heed the Call to Repentance - As v.20 says, "they repented not." Yet, Mt. 4:17 indicates that when Jesus came to Capernaum, He began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Everywhere He went He preached repentance of sin. The great doctrine that both John the Baptist and Christ preached was repentance. They had been hearing this message for well over a year.

What does it mean to repent? Its meaning is a change of mind that results from sorrow over sin, which leads to a change of behavior (cf. v.21). There will be no lasting change in behavior without an inward change of heart and mind. These people were called upon to change, that is, to change their minds and thus to change their lives. True repentance is to reject your own thinking, and to submit to the mind and ways of God. Until a man repents, he thinks that he knows the way to happiness. Proverbs says, "There is a way that seems right unto a man, but the end thereof is death." So we need a change of mind. We need to quit thinking that sin is good, and godliness is not the best way to live.

Who is this One who is calling upon us to repent? Well, the second indictment is this:

2. We Fail to Heed to Proofs of His Miracles, & Believe in Jesus (v.20) - Jesus proved that His preaching was from God Himself by performing the works of power mentioned here. Miracles were God's seal of approval upon His message. Therefore, His call for repentance should have been heeded.

Even though we have not personally seen the miracles of Jesus, we have the historical record of eyewitnesses found in the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John. We have the strong evidence of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. You ignore such evidence to your own peril.

C. The Explanation of the Problem –I think there are two reasons why they did not repent, and these same two reasons plague us today:

1. Smug Self-righteousness – This was one of the biggest problems among the Jews. Evidently, the people of these cities did not believe that they needed to repent. “Only Gentiles & harlots need to repent; I'm surely going to heaven.” In v.23 we see that Capernaum believed that they would be exalted to heaven. Literally, Christ said, “You will not be exalted to heaven, will you?” Here Jesus may be quoting Isa. 14:13, 15, thus comparing the people of Capernaum with the king of Babylon who boasts that he will ascend into heaven. They thought of themselves safe from judgment because they were descendants of Abraham. They considered themselves to be “good moral people.” They looked with contempt upon all Gentiles. It is clear from v. 25 that they had a prideful attitude concerning themselves.

Many Americans who have grown up in a Christian culture have the same smug self-righteousness. They think that the drunks at the bar need to repent. The drug pusher needs to repent. The thief needs to repent, but since they think of themselves as better than average, they do not need to repent. Paul said in Acts 17:30 that God “now commands *all* men *everywhere* to repent.” No one is good enough not to need to repent of sin, for Romans 3:23 says, “all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God.” Barna research has indicated (Dec. '03) that although just 38% of the adult public have confessed their sins and accepted Christ as their savior, 99% claim they will not go to Hell after they die. We have the same problem as the Galileans of Jesus' day.

2. Apathy - The sin of these flourishing places was not violence or sensuality, but indifference and apathy. Christ was simply relegated to the ranks of those who do not matter. These cities did not attack Jesus Christ; they did not drive Him from their gates, like they did at Nazareth.

I believe we have a big problem with apathy today. What about your own life? Is Christ *important* to you? The solemn denunciation of heavy judgment is that of the people who stood in a blaze of light, and simply paid no attention to it.

On Dec. 7, 1941, we lost much at the hands of the Japanese at Pearl Harbor. They destroyed 8 of our battleships, and most of our planes. Worst of all, 2400 lives were lost. Yet early that morning, those who were watching the radar screen saw many planes on the radar screen. They notified a young lieutenant, who assessed the situation and concluded it was nothing. It was probably just planes arriving from the mainland. He said, “Don't worry about it.” How wrong he was! He had received warnings of impending death & destruction, and yet, he said, “Don't worry about it.” Even so, many hear from Jesus and others the warnings of God's judgment upon sin, and yet they say it's not big deal; don't worry about it.

II. THE GREAT SIN OF UNREPENTANCE IS CONDEMNED

How serious is this sin of unrepentance, unbelief, self-righteousness and apathy? Here we see that when you know about Jesus Christ, and have received spiritual privileges and opportunities, judgment for a failure to repent will be great indeed. God judges sin. That is taught from Genesis to Revelation in the Bible. And so Jesus warns the Jews of his day that they were not exempt from the judgment of God if they do not repent. Jesus warned them of the greatness of their sin of rejecting Him and His message. We see this first of all:

A. By Way of Comparison – He said in v. 22, “But I say to you, it will be more tolerable¹ for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.” Tyre was a place against which outstanding and clear Old Testament prophecies of judgment had been directed. It was luxurious and extremely wicked. They were known for violence. They were so bad that it was prophesied that they would be destroyed, and their ruins would become a place to spread fishing nets. And that is exactly what happened.

Then, Christ really shocked them when He indicated that their sin was more serious than the sins of Sodom (v.23b). Sodom was worse than New Orleans and San Francisco combined. Do you remember that there were not even ten righteous men to be found in the whole city of Sodom? It was a byword for wickedness. It was so bad that God destroyed the city by raining fire and brimstone upon it. Could anything be worse than Sodom? Yes, Capernaum.

Why was Capernaum and other Galilean cities worthy of worse judgment? The people of these wicked Old Testament cities were indeed more wicked in their outward conduct. So why would they receive a less severe judgment than the Galilean cities? The answer is found in our text. Jesus said that if these miracles had been done in Tyre & Sidon, they would have repented, even with sackcloth and ashes,² an ancient expression of great sorrow. And if He had done these miracles among the Sodomites, as bad as they were, they would have repented, and their city would have remained unto this day, a monument of sparing mercy. Christ, who knows the hearts of all, knew that if He had gone and lived among them, and preached among them, He would have done more good there than where He was. Christ said something similar in Mt. 12:41, “The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it; because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and, behold, a greater than Jonah is here.” Jesus is saying that heathen cities would have received Him better than the religious cities of the Jews, even His own native land. It is well to note here that Jesus pronounces His woes not merely upon the wicked, the immoral, the depraved, but upon those who are indifferent to His claims.

Here is the principle: God does not judge unbelievers merely based on outward conduct. He also bases His judgment upon how much opportunity we had to know the truth. Greater light brings greater responsibility. The Jews had the full Old Testament at their disposal, whereas Sodom was destroyed before the 10 commandments were even given. The people of Jesus' day not only had the Old Testament, but they also had great miracles. Such works should have caused them to reflect on their ways and to turn to God in true sorrow for sin, but that had not been the effect. Self-satisfied complacency is condemned by Christ more severely than grosser sins.

We must remember that the greater our privileges have been, the greater is our condemnation if we have failed to shoulder the responsibilities and if we have not accepted the obligations that these privileges bring with them. What about you? You should know Jesus Christ even better than Chorazin, Bethsaida, or Capernaum. We have His resurrection from among the dead, attested by witnesses, proved by the continuing work of Christ through His church. They did not know the greatest proof of the tender love of Christ, His death on the cross. It is an awful thing for men and women to live under the sound of Christian teaching until it produces no more effect upon their wills and natures than the ringing of church bells, to which they pay no attention. Preachers share the pain of Christ when we see people hear the gospel for months and years, and

¹ “More tolerable” is a comparative of *anekton* - bearable, endurable. Tyre and Sidon are not excused, but it shall be “more tolerable” for them “at the day of judgment.”

² Sackcloth was a coarse kind of cloth, dark in color, and was an appropriate symbol of mourning. Also, the Jews frequently threw ashes on their heads to express their grief at a time of mourning. Remember, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are they that mourn (in repentance over sin).”

yet we see so little change in so many people. If you are never saved, every opportunity that you turn down to receive Jesus will make your suffering more intense in hell. Indeed, this text seems to teach that there will be varying degrees of suffering in hell. Sure, people like Adolf Hitler will suffer greatly in hell, but don't think that only people that bad will go there at all.

The warnings of judgment for failing to repent were also given:

B. By Direct Statements – In v.23a, Jesus says in effect, “You don't really expect to be exalted to heaven, do you?” Swift as an arrow comes the answer, “To Hades you shall descend.” The calamity pronounced by Christ came true, for there is absolutely no trace of Chorazin to be found today. Men have never been able to agree fully about the site of Bethsaida. Furthermore, Hades probably means more than physical death and destruction. Here it can indeed mean “hell.”

So we see that the sin of failing to repent, and failing to believe in Christ, in spite of abundant evidence, bring serious judgment. This is a major problem. So consider with me:

III. THE SOLUTION TO THE GREAT SIN OF UNREPENTANCE

You see, when Jesus gets tough and firm with people, preaching judgment as we see here, He does so with a loving purpose. God's judgment against sin and unbelief is real, so Jesus tells us here the solution to the sin of unbelief. First of all:

A. Exercise Humility (v. 25) – Notice that the truths that lead to salvation are hidden from the “wise and prudent.” That does not necessarily refer to those who are mentally smart, but to those who are wise in their own eyes. They do not have a teachable spirit. They think they know God already. They have a problem with a prideful, superior attitude. You can't tell such people that they need to repent, and trust in Christ as Savior. They do not see a need for that. They see themselves as good enough. Christ openly acknowledges glad agreement³ with His Heavenly Father for withholding spiritual understanding from such people.

Who, then, are the ones that will be saved from sin and judgment? Jesus indicates that the “babes” will understand and be saved. Here, He does not refer to babes as innocent, but such as are utterly dependent upon others. Babies are dependent upon their mothers, and they know it. The word has a metaphorical meaning of “untaught, unskilled.” Spiritually, therefore, babes are those who humbly confess their own nothingness, their emptiness and helplessness, and who, being thoroughly aware of their absolute dependence upon the might and mercy of God, they trust in Him alone. That is the problem with so many people today. They may trust partially in the Lord for their salvation, but they primarily trust in their own works and goodness.

I want to make it clear that the qualifications in v.25 are all moral, not mental or educational. The organ for reception of the Gospel is primarily the heart, not the head. Mt. 18:3-4 says, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Likewise, Isa. 57:15 says, “For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit....’” So if you want to understand the ways of God, and the way of salvation, you need to humble yourself before Him. Also, there is good news here: salvation is not reserved for the intellectuals. Even the most ignorant and untutored are able to

³ “I thank You” is actually from *exomologeō*, “to acknowledge openly and joyfully; to profess to one's honor, to praise.”

apprehend the saving truth concerning Christ.

Next, you need to:

B. Pray for Understanding – Noticed that in v.25 Jesus said that God “revealed [spiritual truths] to babes.” God is known by intellectual investigation, but by divine revelation. Then v. 27 says, “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” Spiritual concepts are hidden from the non-Christian. It seems clear from this verse that you cannot understand the way of salvation and be saved unless Jesus Christ reveal this to you. 2 Cor. 4:4 says, “whose minds the god of this age [Satan] has blinded, who do not believe....” 1 Cor 2.14 says, “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” So you must seek God for spiritual understanding. Furthermore, this is why we need to engage in intercessory prayer for unbelievers. We need to pray that God will open their eyes of understanding (cf. all of I Cor. 2:6-16).

C. Accept Christ's Invitation (v.28) - The solemn words that we have been looking at now, lead up to, and are intended to make more impressive and gracious, the invitation with which this chapter ends: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” We must come to Jesus because He said in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father, but by me.” And as v.27 indicates, all things are given to Jesus. All that we need is found in Him! If you need forgiveness of sin, you can only find it in Jesus. If you need hope for beyond the grave, you can only find it in Jesus. If you need rest for your souls and peace with God, you can only find it in Jesus.

So after preaching such a harsh sermon of woe and judgment, Jesus gently appeals for you to come to Him and receive rest in your souls and peace with God. Will you do it today? Don't let pride or self-righteousness keep you from coming to Christ.

Conclusion: John Newton was a slave dealer, a wretched, vile man. Somehow God's mercy reached down to him and he was gloriously saved, and his life transformed. He wrote hymns and preached many sermons for the Savior. At the end of his life, when on his deathbed, some friends came to see him and said, “John, we're going to miss you.” Then John Newton said that he was going to heaven before them. In time, they would follow. And he said, “I want you to know where you can find me when you get to heaven. Just look for me at the feet of the thief Christ saved.” Even after many years of serving Christ, John still saw himself as the chief of sinner. He had no problem with self-righteousness. He knew he needed a Savior. He knew he needed forgiveness. Do you recognize your own need for Jesus as Savior? If so, that's the starting place. Why not take the next step, and trust in Him as your Savior?

Sources: William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT & Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957); William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: Matthew* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975?); Charles R. Erdman, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster, 1966); Oliver B. Greene, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Vol. 1, (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1971); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); Matthew Henry (on *Online Bible* [CD-ROM]); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol 7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); G. Campbell Morgan; Pentz; Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, reprint, Christian Publishing Co.; Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979);

Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal* (Matthew), (c) 1980 SP Publications, Victor Books. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Edersheim & Robertson had nothing significant to add.

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This document has not been transcribed from an audio recording, but is the result of the sermon preparation process. Most outlines are original to the author, but much of the content of the notes are taken from commentaries, other sermons, and Bible study aids (see sources above). Sermons are preached without notes, and thus the content of the “live” sermon is in the author’s own words. To get an audio recording of this message, you may send \$1 for each audio cassette tape ordered, plus \$3 shipping & handling for each order mailed in. Up to 2 messages come on each cassette. Make checks payable to Swift Creek Baptist Church, P.O. Box 235, Colonial Heights, VA 23834.