

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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TO WHOM SHALL I COMPARE THIS GENERATION

Matthew 11:13-24

Unresponsiveness to the voice of God is the characteristic of this generation. This indifference will lead the majority to their downfall. That is the declaration of Jesus in Matthew 11:13-24. Let's read this passage.

Matthew 11:13. "For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John.

14 "And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.

15 "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

16 "But to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions,

17 "and saying: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we mourned to you, and you did not lament.'

18 "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'

19 "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' But wisdom is justified by her children."

20 Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent:

21 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

22 "But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you.

23 "And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.

24 "But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you."

The fulfillment of a promise

Here in v. 13, we read that *all the prophets and the law prophesied until John*. What the Lord Jesus is saying is that up to this point, up to the time of John the Baptist, everything was just prophecy. But from John the Baptist onward, there is fulfillment, the fulfillment of prophecy. The whole OT pointed forward to the kingdom of God. But it was just a promise. From now on, we begin to see the fulfillment of that promise.

God does not just make promises. What He promises, He will do. And so for generations, people waited for the salvation to come, the salvation that was in Jesus Christ. Up to that point, there was nothing to be seen in the way of salvation. But when John the Baptist came, the last prophecy of the OT was fulfilled. It says in Malachi 4:5, the last book of the OT, *Behold, I will send you Elijah the*

prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. John the Baptist was the promised Elijah, the forerunner who was to precede the Messiah. Obviously John was not Elijah in person. But he was Elijah in the sense that he was like Elijah in spirit and power and work. Speaking about John the Baptist, the angel Gabriel said, *He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah ...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord* (Luke 1:17). John will show the same zeal and the same frame of spirit that Elijah had.

But the Jews did not understand it in this way. They thought that Elijah would really appear in person to introduce the Messiah. This popular expectation led Jesus to use the words, *If you are willing to accept it*, implying that the affirmation that John was the promised Elijah, was an idea contrary to their expectation. If you are willing to accept it, to accept that John the Baptist is that Elijah that God has promised to send.

There is another reason why Jesus felt the need to say that. Let's ask this question. It is up to them, to the Jews, to decide whether they are willing to accept that? Certainly! There is here an invitation to explore the implications of their decision. Because if you are willing to accept that John the Baptist is Elijah (in spirit and in power), you will consequently be willing to accept that Jesus is none other than God manifested in the flesh.

You might ask, 'What is the link between Elijah and Jesus? How are the two connected?' It probably didn't take too long for the Jewish hearers to figure it out. You only need to read Malachi 3:1 to see it. There it says, *"Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me.* Now in this verse, who is speaking? The messenger is going to prepare the way before who? Who is actually coming? 'I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me, says the Lord of hosts.' It is the Lord of hosts who is speaking. This means that God Himself is coming. Every Jew knew that God was going to come because many prophets have talked about it. And here, Jesus makes them realize that the identification of John with prophesied Elijah has messianic implications. Because if you accept that John the Baptist is Elijah, then you are going to accept that Jesus is God. If you accept that John the Baptist is the prophesied Elijah, you will have to accept that Jesus is the fulfillment of OT hopes and prophecy. This is the inevitable implication. Are you willing to accept that? That is why Jesus says, *if you are willing to receive it.* This phrase acknowledges how difficult it was to believe it. In fact, most Jews will not accept it.

Children playing in the market places

Then the Lord Jesus goes on to say in v. 16, *To what can I compare this generation?* The illustration that He came up with was that of children at play in a market place. By this illustration, He was rebuking the people for being no better than children in their response to God's work. This generation is immature and childish because it was unresponsive to the calls issued by John the Baptist and by Jesus.

In those days, the market place was a public place where much people met together. It is a place where anybody can sell whatever he wants and anybody can stand up and say whatever he likes. So in one corner, you can have people selling chicken. In another place, you have people selling vegetables. In another corner, there is a person giving a speech about Greek philosophy.

With this picture in mind, we can understand why Paul often went to the market place to preach. That is where everybody was talking to everybody! In fact, if you have nothing to do and you have time in your hand, where would you go? To the market place of course. There you meet your friends. There you talk about the latest political situation. There you vent your frustrations. There you listen to the new ideas that people are talking about. And with all this noise, you have children who are playing and running around.

Jesus compares this generation to children playing in the market place. One group of children says to the other, in v. 17, *We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we mourned to you, and you did not lament.* Children like to play games. They like to imitate adults and so they act out what they see done by others. When do you play flute? It is an instrument used in marriages and festivals as a sign of joy. So a few children begin to play wedding music on their flute and they cry out to others, 'Let's march and play 'wedding'. But there was no response. 'We played the flute and you didn't dance.' So the others shout back, 'No. We don't want to dance around today. We are not in the mood to have a wedding.' The first group, still wanting to play, began to wail and shout back, 'You don't want to play the wedding game? Well, let's play 'funeral'. We will wail and you will mourn.' 'No,' the second group said, 'we don't want to play the funeral game. We don't feel like acting sad.' 'We mourned to you but you refused to mourn. You didn't want to play.'

Now the point of all this is that while the children in the second group were listening to the others who tried to play the wedding game and the funeral game, they did not want to take part in it. They were willing to listen, but they didn't want to join in. What the Lord Jesus means is this. This generation is just like that. They are willing to listen, but they are not willing to participate. They are not willing to respond to the word of God.

This point is very important to understand. God has revealed His salvation. The good news has been proclaimed in every generation. And in every generation, many people were willing to listen to it. However very few were willing to trust God completely and to follow Him.

Indifference: the problem of this generation

When John the Baptist was preaching, people came by the thousands to listen to his message. But even though he drew crowds and many were willing to enjoy his light for a while (John 5:35), yet the people as a whole rejected him. When the Lord Jesus preached, great multitudes came to listen to his teaching. Remember for example the feeding of the five thousand. So these people were there, listening to Him. But only a fraction of them became true disciples. Only a few entered into His salvation. Those who hear are many. Those who are saved are few.

Some feel the need to justify their lack of response with some excuse. They say, 'Well, we like to listen to John because he is an interesting character. But actually we cannot respond to his teaching because he has a demon.' In other words, he is mad. And they say that they cannot follow the teaching of a person who is insane. And of Jesus, they have another excuse. 'Well, Jesus, His preaching is good. It is very effective and powerful. But really, if you get to know Him more, you will discover that He is a gluttonous man and a wine drinker. If you invite Him for a meal, you will see that He likes to eat and to drink. And it doesn't bother Him who He eats and drinks with, even if they are tax-collectors and sinners. If He can't separate Himself from immoral people, how can we seriously respond to His teaching? You can listen to His preaching, that's fine, but don't take it too seriously.'

This reminds me of Ezekiel 33:32 where God warns the prophet Ezekiel and says, *Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them.* 'They can come in large numbers to listen to your preaching. But they will listen to you in the same way that they would listen to somebody who sings beautiful songs. Because they will not do what they hear. They will not respond to your message.' To the Israelites in exile, Ezekiel was no more than a good entertainer. He was amusing to listen to and to watch. There is no doubt that what he said caught their attention. But just as an entertainer demands no commitment, so they did not sense a need to commit themselves to do Ezekiel's words. I wonder if that is sometimes the situation in our churches today. After a church service, we often say, 'That was a great message, pastor.' But how many of us really make the effort of putting into practice what we heard.

So this is the central point of our passage. Before their eyes, God's salvation was being fulfilled. Up to that point, everything was only a promise. Now we begin to see the fulfillment of that promise. Now Simeon, that great servant of God, could say, *My eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared before the face of all peoples* (Luke 2:30-31). God's salvation has come. The kingdom of God was coming with power (as we saw in our lesson on Matthew 11:12) because the words of salvation were being preached with great power by John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus. And Jesus is saying, 'This generation is just like this. They are unresponsive to My message. The vast majority prefer to ignore My invitation to salvation.'

Wisdom is justified

Then the Lord Jesus goes on to say in v. 19, *Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds*. In the parallel passage in Luke 7:35, we read, *Yet wisdom is vindicated by all her children*. Even though the words are different (Matthew has 'vindicated by her deeds' and Luke has 'vindicated by all her children,'), both passages say basically the same thing. Here John and Jesus are regarded as messengers of wisdom. And in this context, wisdom means, 'God's plan,' 'God's way,' or 'God's mind.' Wisdom is just another way to speak of God's counsel. In v. 19, wisdom is personified in the sense that God's mind is spoken of as though it is a person. It is an agent who expresses the mind of God.

Now, wisdom is justified by her works. That is, she is proved right by her actions. This is much like Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:20 where He says, *By their fruits you will know them*. A person who is wise will be known by his actions. It is not just in how much he says or how much he knows. In the Bible, a person is recognized as wise on the basis of his deeds. That is why you will notice that in the OT, wisdom is very much concerned with right living, with the way you live and behave, about a lifestyle that is in harmony with God's mind. This is in line with the statement in Luke where Jesus says that 'wisdom is vindicated by her children.' This means that God's purposes in John and Jesus will be vindicated by their results, that is, by the lifestyle of those who come to faith and become part of the people of God.

Worldly wisdom

There is a worldly wisdom and there is a wisdom that is from above. We have an example of worldly wisdom in the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21). In the eyes of the world, this man was wise. He knows how to make money and he got richer and richer. His land was so productive that he decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones in order to store up all his riches and sell his grain at the right price. This is good business thinking. You don't want to rush out and sell your grain at a low price simply because your barns are not big enough to store it. So he increased his storage capacity. And he said to himself, 'Since I have so much laid up for many years, I'll take life easy. I will just eat, drink and be merry.' The world regards this as wisdom. That is what most people would do if they had all that money.

However, from God's point of view, he is not wise at all. The Bible calls him a fool. Why is he a fool? Because he spent all his time laying up treasures for himself, forgetting that when he dies, he will have to leave it all behind. He will not be able to take one single penny with him. And because he never thought of storing up treasure in heaven, he will have nothing in his spiritual bank account. That is foolishness! He was rich, but he ended up being so poor.

The children of wisdom

But who are the people who will accept this spiritual wisdom? To what kind of person does God reveal His saving truth? Jesus says in Matthew 11:25, *I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes*.

It is the babes, the humble, the simple-hearted people, the unlearned, who will be able to understand God's truth. This understanding is not the product of some natural law because spiritual understanding does not depend on human intelligence or status. It is a gift from God who reveals His truth to those in whom He is well pleased. His choice falls on those the world would never expect to understand: the children. Jesus uses children as the typical example of those whom the world regards as insignificant, helpless and defenceless. Yet, these are the ones who will understand the mind of God.

Elsewhere in Matthew 18, Jesus says, 'Unless you are willing to become helpless and feel your dependence on God, unless you humble yourself and are willing to be regarded as foolish in the eyes of the world, you will never know God's truth.' When I ponder about that humility, I think about the words of the apostle Paul in 1Corinthians 4:12-13 where he said that he became the garbage of the world. *And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat. **We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.*** Paul was willing to be the scum of the world for Christ's sake. That is humility.

The children of wisdom are those who can see the wisdom of God in John the Baptist and Jesus. They are those who 'justify' God by accepting His message. They are the product of divine wisdom and activity. And this begins with humility and a repentant attitude. They are contrasted to those who reject God's counsel. Jesus compares the people who turn their backs on the message of salvation to children who sit down and refuse to play any games. They don't like the games played by the other playmates. Most people are like that. They reject any attempt to restrict their own play. They just want to keep playing their old game of unchanged life.

Through this account, Jesus asks us some basic questions. Where do you stand? What do you think of John and Jesus? Will you side with heavenly wisdom? Or will you be like the complaining children, wanting God to play by your rules? The mood of the passage calls for a choice and a response. And the choice that you make will determine your eternal state because there is to be a day of judgment. On that day, Jesus will be the judge of the world.

The judgment of this generation

Here it is important to understand how Jesus preached judgment in His teaching, and especially to whom He preached it. Interestingly, He doesn't preach judgment to pagans. His words of severe warning are not reserved for those outside, as we might have thought, but for those inside. They are not preached to those needing conversion, but to those who thought they already had it. It is the religious of Israel and the disciples of Jesus who got the message of judgment from Jesus.

From v. 20 onward, we see that the failure of this generation to respond to Jesus is matched by the failure of some cities to respond to miracles. This passage implies that the miracles alone – without a verbal message – should have revealed that God was at work and so should have caused them to repent. But they did not repent, and therefore they will be condemned on the day of judgment.

Jesus says that there are different degrees of judgment. Some judgment will be more 'intolerable' than others. The judgment upon the Jewish cities of Capernaum, Bethsaida and Chorazin will be far greater than for the pagan cities of Tyre, Sidon and Sodom. Tyre, Sidon and Sodom never had the opportunity of Jesus' ministry. Capernaum, Bethsaida and Chorazin did, but they neglected and rejected Christ. Therefore their judgment will be much more severe. People who live in areas where there is much witness for Christ will be held much more accountable than people who had less witness.

Christian countries should take heed of this judgment addressed to the places 'in which most of His miracles were done.' Jesus has been present in His church and there He has done most of his miracles. But that, finally, is not the point. The point is: Have you changed in response to His grace? Is His presence changing you? The people of Bethsaida, Chorazin and Capernaum had experienced Jesus

and had seen His power. But that is not salvation. Salvation involves a reaction to grace. Salvation is to have Christ in such a way that you are transformed by His presence in you. And the warning here is that Jesus' presence, without change, can lead to a damnation deeper than Sodom's.