

Woes of Judgment and Call of Mercy

Matthew 11:20-30

Christ's power is on display as we look at His words of both judgment and mercy! JD Penticost, in his classic book on the life of Christ, said this concerning the passage, "In view of the rejection evidenced in the previous section, Christ pronounced woe upon the cities in which His miracles had been performed." But let's not miss the wonderful invitation given to all at the end! **Scholars believe that this is a continuation of Jesus' teaching about the rejection of John the Baptist and Jesus by the Jews. Now Christ gets very specific concerning the coming judgment.**

I. Judgment Given for Rejection Jesus will condemn these cities again using almost the exact words in Luke 10:12-15.

"Then began he to upbraid (Lit. - rebuke) the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not:" Matthew 11:20 Overview statement to this section of judgment.

"mighty works" – Three times in verses 20-24 we read the words, "mighty works." (v. 20, 21, 23) This would be defined as both His miracles and teaching! Over a year had passed since Jesus began His ministry and we read often of the great crowds gathering because of His work of healings and the people's amazement at Christ's teachings. (signs, works, miracles – Mark 1:33; John 6:2) (words – Matthew 7:31-32; Luke 4:32) These were direct evidence of who He was and a fulfillment of Scripture regarding the Messiah.

"repented not" – We don't have to struggle with interpretation to realize Christ's desired outcome of His works and words was repentance. As we study His life, we see this played out over and over again as people came and confessed their sin and Jesus as Messiah. Woman at the Well, Zaccheus; Peter; (name more)

"Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, 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 unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you." Matthew 11:21-22

"Woe unto thee" – This is an Old Testament form of rebuke meaning, "how greatly one will suffer." But this declaration of judgment is mixed also pity and sorrow! Jesus will often use this phrase when speaking to the hardened unbelieving Jews, judgment given with sadness!

"Chorazin/Bethsaida" – Located north of Capernaum along the Sea of Galilee. Several interesting facts concerning these two cities: Bethsaida – home of three disciples (Peter, Andrew, Philip); Chorazin is not mentioned in any other passage; no miracles are recorded in these towns, but they saw many in their area and heard Him speak regularly! They had full clear evidence of the power and person of Jesus almost every day! This reminds us that Jesus did and said so much more than what is recorded in the Gospels. (John 20:30-31; 21:25)

"Tyre/Sidon" – Phoenician cities north of Israel along the Mediterranean Sea. These ancient Gentile cities were prophesied against by Ezekiel (Ezekiel 26-28) because of their wickedness and idolatry. Later both

Nebuchadnezzar and Alexander the Great conquered and destroyed them. At the time of Christ, they had rebuilt mainly because of their natural harbors.

“Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes”/“It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you.” – Tyre and Sidon were destroyed as prophesied. But Jesus is saying that because of His “mighty works” done in Chorazin and Bethsaida, they will be judged greater because of their lack of repentance and recognizing Him to be their Messiah. Another stinging statement is the fact the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon would have repented if they had seen the same works!

“And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴ But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.” Matthew 11:23-24

“Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven” – Jesus left heaven and moved to Capernaum. That might be an oversimplification and a bit sacrilegious, but this is really what is meant here. The Son of God, the Creator of heaven and earth, God in human flesh, lived in their city. They saw firsthand His works and heard His words every day.

“for it the mighty works,..., had been done in Sodom”/“it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.” – Then Jesus spoke of the vilest and disdained city in Jewish history, Sodom. I don’t think most of us understand what strong, offensive language Jesus is using here with His Jewish audience! Even more than the curse on Chorazin and Bethsaida, Capernaum had an even harsher condemnation. Jesus declared that Sodom, with all its wickedness, would have recognized who He was and would have diverted from total annihilation, and in the end, Sodom’s destruction would be less than Capernaum’s. Sodom had much gross sin to be judged for but even more vile in the eyes of God is Capernaum’s sin, reject the Messiah!

“Capernaum,.....shalt be brought down to hell:” – The Greek in this phrase is much more emotional and dramatic. Other English translations handle this phrase with, “go down; descend down; thrown down; hurtled down.” The verbs are much more violent. God’s desired result of the opportunity, privilege, and the blessing of Christ in their midst, was repentance and acknowledgment of Jesus as their Messiah. In Matthew 8-9, five out of ten miracles were done in Capernaum. Yes, they lined up at His door for healing, fought for position to hear Him speak, followed Him around to see His miracles, realized His power and authority, appreciated His stand against religion as normal, and many sacrificed much to see and hear Him. We never hear of Capernaum mocking, ridiculing, running Jesus out of town, or desiring to throw Him off a cliff or stone Him, yet very few repented and acknowledged Him as their Messiah! Very few from Capernaum and the surrounding area threw themselves down before Him and said, “My Lord, and my God!” Their sin was **indifference, familiarity, and not honestly considering the person of Jesus**. And because of it God will dramatically throw them down to hell!

These words of Jesus will not sit well with His listeners. Jesus had used three notoriously wicked Gentile cities in comparison with their own Jewish towns and made the Gentile one’s fare better on judgment day! Evidently,

the hearts of the Gentiles were not as hard as the Jews! These statements will cause many Jews to continue raising questions about Jesus. These are not words people enjoyed listening to, this was beyond the teaching of a Rabbi or even a prophet. Jesus of Nazareth was sounding like the Son of God, the Judge of the world! And this will offend them!

II. Explanation of Rejection This is a prayer of Christ to His Father which seems to be repeated in Luke 10:21-22. Jesus repeating Himself should not bother us, Christ also gave the “Lord’s Prayer” twice to His disciples.

“At that time” is a loose Greek phrase to designate time – it could have followed Jesus’ pronunciation of “woe” against the cities or could have been said a bit later. Most English translations have it at the same time. It is interesting to note, Jesus will occasionally break into prayer as He teaches just as if His Father was a part of the listening crowd. But of course, He was!

“At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee (Gk – not only full of thankfulness but also praise), O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things (Lit. who Jesus was – the Messiah) from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. ²⁶ Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight. ²⁷ All things (Lit. Gospel truths; Jesus’ mission) are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.” Matthew 11:25-27

“O Father, Lord of heaven and earth” – Jesus will acknowledge His Father twice within this prayer (v. 25, 26) We see Christ use two names for God; first “Father” which shows the close relationship between the Father and Son, and then “Lord of heaven and earth” showing the vast power and scope of God.

“wise and prudent” – Within this prayer we see the reason for the Jew's rejection of Jesus, their prideful, hard hearts which didn't allow their ears to hear. “Wise and prudent” could be translated as “wise in their own knowledge.” Their unbelief did not come because of a lack of evidence, demonstration, or clear teaching; it was the heart of the listener! These theologians could not be taught or corrected. This is a sarcastic statement much like Christ's words, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” Mark 2:17 Not only did they not see the condition of their sinful hearts, but they would also not listen to the truth concerning it! Therefore, God hid the truth of who Jesus was and His ministry from them! The rejection of prideful men is a principle of God, Paul quotes Isaiah in 1 Cor. 1:19, “For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.”

“babes” – This is the opposite of “wise and prudent” and could be translated, “little children.” These babes had hearts that were simple, humble, and eager to learn of truth! They were conscious of their ignorance and need and sat ready to hear, receive, and respond! “The rich man is wise in his own conceit, but the poor that hath understanding searcheth him out.” Prov. 28:11 Jesus had just given an illustration of the spoiled children who could not be satisfied but now He speaks of children who are quick to please the Maker of the universe!

“for so it seemed good in thy sight”/“whomsoever the Son will reveal him” – These statements teach us the sovereignty of God. His will is at play within these two groups – the hidden truths from the “wise and prudent” and the revealed truth to the “babes.” It is all at the good pleasure of God and who the Son will chose to reveal God. Matthew 16:16-17

Closest and Uniqueness of the Father and Son – “All things are delivered unto me of my Father” (v. 27) speaks of a specific time of commissioning. There was a time when God gave Christ “all things” pertaining to His plan and ministry to save mankind! It was an important moment, a turning point, a special time of commitment, love, and obedience to the Father’s will! The perfect knowledge between Son and Father is stressed in verse 27. “know” is described as the very intimate, deep, experience and understanding of Father to Son and Son to Father. Their knowledge of One another is so perfect. And with this knowledge, Jesus reveals His Father to us! John the Apostle says this in John 1:18, “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” Jesus reveals His Father to us! What a terrible tragedy to reject it!

III. Mercy Extended – Choice to be Made Judgment had been declared on Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida for their unbelief but now Jesus offers mercy to anyone who would come to Him!

“ Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:28-30

Jesus describes Himself – What a wonderful self-description! Jesus said He is meek and lowly in heart. If we are to be like Christ, we better understand these two characteristics.

“meek” – many translations will use the word “gentle,” but it is more than that. Meek is gentle but also submissive, preferring others, and unassertive, but what makes this always an interesting descriptive word is it emphasizes the strength of the person, not having to be on display. (submission of a horse to a rider; submission of a soldier to a commander) That is Jesus!

“lowly” – is humble. God hates pride, He rejects the proud, He resists the proud, and He doesn’t let proud prosper. We find this truth throughout the Scriptures, so we can’t be surprised to see Jesus was the opposite; He was humble.

It is amazing to consider Jesus, the Creator of the world, coming to earth and living among men, but yet the greatest of His characteristics is meek and humble! (Phil.2:5-9) Instead of hard and haughty, Jesus was kind, gentle, patient, sweet, good, mild, loving, understanding, and humble. How we need to be like Jesus! How our light would shine in this dog-eat-dog world, this get-a-head-at-all-cost society, this self-focused culture, if we would live meek and lowly in heart! What a draw we could be to the Gospel of Christ! What a wonderful Savior to proclaim!

Two “yokes” – Yokes were regularly used from ancient times and really didn’t change much until they were replaced with gas-powered farm equipment. There are still third-world countries that use yokes with oxen. The two animals have to work as a team to do the labor, the yoke binds them together to jointly complete a task one of them could not be accomplished without the other. Jesus is an easy choice for life’s yoke!

“labor and are heavy laden” – This is the yoke Jesus’ listeners were under, a difficult one. He was speaking of the religious burden that had been growing throughout the centuries. By the time of Christ, there were 613 traditional laws outside of the Scripture put on the Jews. A good honest Jew lived under the constant pressure to remember and keep these laws. It was known as the “yoke of the law.” They toiled and lived under a constant state of weariness because of these rules. In Matthew 23:4 Jesus said this concerning the Religious Leaders, “For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.” Please realize many people live under a religious, or a self-made yoke trying to be good enough for heaven. This is a difficult position for it is unattainable! No one can work themselves to be good enough for heaven, not at Jesus’ time and certainly not today!

“easy, and my burden is light” – Here is the yoke Jesus offers, easy and light! “Easy” has the idea of “good” versus harsh, hard, and uncomfortable. In our culture, we might consider how a good pair of shoes might feel, especially after a long day of wearing an uncomfortable pair! Jesus’ yoke is comfortable and pleasant! How the devil has spread lies about the way of Jesus! This yoke is in fellowship with the gentle and lowly One and it’s easy and good to carry because of the One we are yoked to. This easy yoke was always God’s plan. (Jer. 6:16) In 2 Cor. 4:17, Paul had to write about the “light affliction” which was but for a moment. This is the same thought, yoked with Jesus makes doing His will easy. (1 John 5:3)

Three tasks – The Religious Leaders would say “do” and “attain” but here Jesus shows His authority to say “come,” “take” and “learn.”

“Come” – The call to come is for “all” people (v.28) who are laboring and weary. That’s really everyone but many will not see their need! This is the first step to eternal life with God! (Jesus said this elsewhere - John 6:35-37; 7:37-38)

“Take” – This means a volunteer submission to Christ’s yoke; to become His disciple! It’s much like the #1 saying of Jesus, “Follow me.” An action on our part to take, follow, and yoke with Jesus!

“Learn” – Here is our job while being yoked to Jesus, learning of Him! Learning of Jesus is a process and growth – it’s emulating – to understand and know! (1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:6; Col. 2:6-7) As our faith deepens so does our peace and dependence on God. As we learn to trust the one we are yoked with, our heart turns from naturally worried and fearful to quiet and rest!

One Result –

“Rest unto your souls” – I think it can be said that man desires peace more than almost anything else. Peace in their life, peace in relationships, peace in the world, peace in their souls! But what does the peace of God mean? Your soul can enjoy comfort, refreshment, relief, deliverance, quiet, healing, rejuvenation, pardon, security, fellowship, and eternal life! The world might be in turmoil, relationships might be strained, and outside pressures might be mounting, but when our souls are at rest with God, life is bearable. We have the strength, grace, and ability to continue because we are yoked with Christ! The writers of the Epistles wrote much of this wonderful “rest.” Rom. 5:1-2; Eph. 2:13-15; Phil. 4:6-7; Heb. 4:2-3

These truths have always been God’s message – Ps. 37:3-9; 55:22

Before we move to the Applications, I want to point out two doctrinal truths found in this passage. The predestination of God’s choices in the lives of man and the free will of man to decide on his own. As we study the Scriptures, we regularly and without a sense of contradiction see themes of divine sovereignty and human responsibility mixed alongside each other! (Phil. 2:12-13)

Predestination of God: In verses 25-27, Jesus tells us that God revealed the truth of the person of Christ to whom it “seemed good” in His sight and that Jesus showed the Father to “whomsoever the Son will reveal him.” These are clearly two statements teaching that God’s sovereign work in salvation. (John 15:16; 17:2; Eph. 1:3-6; 1 Pet. 2:9)

Freewill of Man: In verses 28-30, Jesus invites us to come, take, and learn. It is our choice to make. Just as we invite a child to sit on our lap, or a friend to go for a walk, Jesus invites us to come, take, and learn! The principle of a man deciding to choose God for salvation or later for righteousness living as a believer is found throughout the Bible. (Josh. 24:15; Ps. 119:30; Matt. 7: 13-14; 16:24; Rom. 6:16-23; James 4:8)

Though this is difficult for our finite minds to comprehend, it makes complete sense to God. So, here is another place where we must trust the wise heart of God. He chose us before the foundation of the world, but we chose Him!

Unbelievers and Believers Application:

1. With spiritual privilege and light comes responsibility and degrees of punishment. Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida had the great privilege of seeing and hearing the Messiah. He lived among them, taught their masses, healed their sick, and raised their dead; yet they did not commit to Him as Messiah. They enjoyed the honor of having Him but took no responsibility to call Him their Lord. Remember the Samaritans of Sychar? (John 4:40-42) After Christ had been with them for two days, this is what was declared to the Samaritan woman, “Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.” It is agreed that Christ is teaching that there are degrees of judgment determined by the amount of light one has received and subsequently rejected. This is a principle taught throughout the New Testament. (Matt. 10:14-15; Luke 12:47-48; Heb. 2:3; 10:29-31) The Life Application Bible makes this comment, “Similarity, nations and cities with churches on every corner and Bibles in every home will have no excuse on judgment day if they do not repent and believe.” p. 1583 This is a sobering thought, for ourselves, our families, our churches, and our nation. We are without excuse to hear, accept, and obey. We have the whole written Word of God, the Gospel preached is accessible to all, Christian living is taught and preached, and as believers, we have the Holy Spirit! Let’s take an honest evaluation of our souls. First, be secure in our salvation and then in our obedience to the will of God as given in the Scriptures. The teaching of Jesus is clear, we are responsible to obey the truth we have heard, or we will fall under a greater judgment than those who have not heard! Matthew 7:24-27

2. We are still in a time of Mercy! Come to Christ, take His yoke, and learn of Him! Jesus had proven through his message and works that He was the Messiah. Jerusalem, with its leaders and system of religion, along with Galilee had rejected Him. I was reminded this week in one of my study books, that not one Galilean city is mentioned in the book of Acts. We know of countless Gentile cities that received the Gospel but not one city in Galilee where Jesus spent the bulk of His ministry, is mentioned, how sad! But now is the time of salvation to be preached to the world! Remember, this is a time to talk of His mercy! Let’s be quick to give the Gospel as God gives us opportunity! But also, please be diligent with your soul to learn of and obey Christ. Be careful to not just fill your mind with information about Jesus in your Bible reading or a class like this but be quick to obey! Don’t be like Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum; indifferent because of familiarity, and forget to commit to Christ and obey His ways. Are there areas of your life you should change into the image of Christ? This is a time of mercy, but the time of judgment is coming! (1 Cor. 3:11-15)