

Scripture for Sunday July 5th 2020

Matt 11:16-19, 25-30 (NIV)

¹⁶ “To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

¹⁷ “‘We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’

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, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.”

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.

²⁷ “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Matt 12:15-21 (NIV)

¹⁵ . . . Jesus withdrew from that place. A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill. ¹⁶ He warned them not to tell others about him. ¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁸ “Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. ¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. ²⁰ A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. ²¹ In his name the nations will put their hope.”¹

¹ Isaiah 42:1-4.

Sermon: Do We “Get It” Yet?

Jesus tells his critics, “There’s just no pleasing some people!” You will all have heard that expression before, or one like it. It’s often said in frustration, especially when you’re trying your best and those around you just don’t “get it.” Jesus expresses those sentiments through a cultural parable. In those days, children would often play together in the town square and, as you all know, kids can squabble as they try to find a game that everyone will join in. The games they played back then were *not* “hospital” or “school,” with arguments over who would be the authoritative doctor or teacher; rather they played at “weddings” and “funerals,” two common festivities that children liked to mimic. Jesus bemoans his generation² saying: “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.”³ In other words, we wanted to celebrate and play “weddings,” but you refused to participate; so we sang a funeral lament and you wouldn’t grieve. There’s just no pleasing some people!

Jesus then explains the parable. He tells the crowds: “John the Baptist⁴ preached of the need for repentance and spoke of God’s coming judgement, and you didn’t like him or his message. His self-denial was too harsh; he was too threatening; he didn’t “party” like you wanted to - and so you demonised him.” In contrast, Jesus celebrated and spoke of God’s generous love and forgiveness, and the coming of the Kingdom of God. But his critics said Jesus was a wild party animal, “He’s *a glutton and a drunkard*, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”⁵ Jesus wasn’t behaving “spiritual” enough. This generation wants the dour John to dance, and the joyful Jesus to weep. In more modern language, we might say “the minister is too ‘liberal,’ or too ‘evangelical’; there’s just no pleasing some people!”

But there is much more being implied here. In the Old Testament, people were alerted to beware of false prophets and, of course, to resist them. They were also warned of wayward, disobedient sons. According to the mosaic law, the parents of such a son were to grab hold of him and take him to the town elders, and say: “‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. *He is a glutton and a drunkard.*’ Then all the men of his town are to stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you.”⁶ Matthew deliberately echoes that description of gluttony and drunkenness. Jesus is therefore being compared to an unruly and disloyal son. The religious elite didn’t like his spiritual practices. Jesus hung out with people he wasn’t supposed to engage;⁷ he feasted instead of fasted,⁸ he was deemed to be a corrupting, evil influence. They didn’t want people to have anything to do with him; indeed, they were implying that it would be better to put Jesus to death so he doesn’t lead the

² See also Matt 12:38-45; 16:4; 17:17; 23:29-36. The lack of understanding of “this generation” runs throughout the entire section from 12:2–24.

³ Matt 11:16-17. Earlier, Jesus compared those who hear his words but failed to heed them as a “foolish builder” (Matt 7:26–27). Now he compares them to quarreling children who can’t play together happily. See also Luke 7:31-15.

⁴ Whom Jesus had just praised and acclaimed as the foretold Elijah-like figure; Matt 11:7-15.

⁵ Matt 11:18-19. Jesus self identifies as the “Son of Man” here.

⁶ See Deut 21:18–21.

⁷ See Matt 10:10-13.

⁸ See Matt 9:14-17.

people astray! It seems to me that when *any* generation fails to recognize the new things God’s Spirit is doing among them, and want to kill them off in the name of religious legalism and burdensome tradition, Jesus would have harsh things to say to those undiscerning who just don’t “get it.”⁹ “Whoever has ears, let them hear.”¹⁰

Think about that for a moment; John the Baptist in prison doesn’t “get it,” the religious leaders don’t “get it,” the crowds who witnessed Jesus’ miracles don’t respond with repentance¹¹ – they don’t “get it” either, even the Jesus’ own disciples don’t really “get it.” So who *does* “get it”? Not the wise and learned, but the children – the meek and lowly of heart, the people of no social standing.”¹² To those who know they need rescuing by God, it is to them that God will reveal himself. God works in mysterious ways. Society’s outcasts were discovering more of God simply by following Jesus than the learned specialists who objected to him on the grounds that what he was doing didn’t fit in with their complicated theologies. As Jesus said earlier, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”¹³

Matthew’s portrayal of “Jesus” is not as a religious genius who has discovered some divine mystery, but as the beloved Son who is on intimate terms with the God the Father. Jesus says “*All things* have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son decides to reveal him.”¹⁴ To know Jesus is to know God; I spoke about those bold words a couple of weeks ago on Father’s Day.¹⁵ You see, Jesus had come to see himself as being like a window onto the living God. It is the Son who had the gift of drawing back the curtain to reveal the truth about God to all who care(d) to see.¹⁶

Some people find those words disturbing and scary, even exclusive. But Matthew, uniquely among the Gospel writers, then presents us with some of the most reassuring words in the New Testament; listen: “Come to me, *all you* who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke on you and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my

⁹ See also Matt 11:20-24; Luke 10:12-15.

¹⁰ Matt 11:15.

¹¹ Matt 11:20 – see [9] for the “woes.”

¹² Matt 11:25. See also Matt 18:1-14, 1 Cor 1:18-31; Luke 18:15-7; Mark 10:13-16. See also:

<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-Scandal-of-the-Cross.pdf> ; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/A-Humble-Heart.pdf> ,

¹³ Matt 5:3,5.

¹⁴ Matt 11:27; Luke 10:22. These words are very Johannine! See: John 3:31-36; 5:19-23; 7:28-29; 10:14-15; 13:3; 17:2,25.

¹⁵ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Jesus-A-Chip-Off-the-Old-Block.pdf> .

¹⁶ The immediate context seems to be that of the 2nd Temple Wisdom Literature: Job 28:12-27; Sirach 1:6-9; 6:18-31; Baruch 3:32; Wisdom 8:4; 9:1-18; 10:10. Jesus is, then, personified Wisdom. And he invites people to take her yoke and to find rest Sirach 24:19-22; 51:23-30; Prov 1:20-23; 8:1-36. Jesus is not merely a messenger of Wisdom, but identified as the heavenly Wisdom of God. This link also ties in with Matt 11:19b: “But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.”

yoke is easy to bear, and my load is not hard to carry.”¹⁷ These comforting words resonate with phrases from Jeremiah and the Wisdom writer, Sirach. I want to talk briefly about that saying, “Take my yoke on you and learn from me”; what does that mean? A “yoke,” of course, is the wooden crosspiece that is fastened over the necks of two cattle and attached to the plow that they are to pull. What’s important is that the two animals are of similar build else the yoke is ill-fitting, uncomfortable, and so chafes their shoulders. If that weren’t the case, one animal would do more work than the other and it’s hard to plough a furrow in a straight line. In the Old Testament and within Jewish tradition, a “yoke” was a common metaphor for servitude and hence obedience. Rabbis customarily spoke of the “yoke of Torah” or being bound to the law of Moses. In the hands of the religious leaders of the day, that “yoke” had become legalistic, petty, and burdensome for many Jews.

It is in light of that experience that Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” That is a powerful message of relief and hope for all who are racked by guilt and a sense of obligation, or who are tired of the word “should,” or who see religion as an impossible set of artificial rules. Shockingly and boldly, Jesus then says, “Take *my* yoke on you and learn from *me*.” He is saying that he himself *replaces Torah*; learn from *me*!¹⁸ Yes, Jesus is claiming *that* kind of authority, and this is underlined in Matthew’s next section on Jesus being “Lord of the Sabbath,” where he claims to be the divinely-authorized *interpreter* of the Mosaic Law.¹⁹ Jesus says that if you are bound to me, I will be alongside you on the journey; I will share the load with you, my yoke is custom-built for you and me, and therefore it results in a balanced load, with no chafing. “For my yoke is easy to bear, and my load is not hard to carry.”²⁰ And you will find rest, forgiveness, mercy. Jesus is being portrayed here as the *true* giver of the Sabbath rest.

It’s worth just emphasizing that Jesus is *not* promising freedom from work, but freedom from an onerous religion. The Jesus way is not an easy one; after all, Jesus has just given a paradoxical warning in the previous chapter, that: “Those who try to keep the life they have will lose it. But those who give up their life for him will find true life.”²¹ Even so, Jesus also claims that having a yoke that is perfectly balanced through being partnered with *him* will bring forth *our* best. And a person will be no longer motivated by fear and guilt but by a passionate desire to see God’s kingdom realized.

Who needs to hear those words again today? Embrace them, may they be “rest for your soul” in whatever circumstances you are facing.

¹⁷ Matt 11:28-30; see also Sirach 51:23-27; Jer 6:16; Exod 33:14. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of the Scriptures in the Gospels*, (Baylor, 2015), 153-57.

¹⁸ That Jesus is greater than Moses is made explicit in Heb 3:3-6; John 5:45-46; 6:32.

¹⁹ Matt 12:1-14. See also Mark 2:23-3:6: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Lord-of-the-Sabbath.pdf> . Of course, Jesus explicitly *reinterprets* the Law in the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5-7 – see 5:17.

²⁰ Matt 11:30.

²¹ See Matt 10:34-39.

Moving on, I suggest Matthew might be asking *his readers*, through the words Jesus, “Do you ‘get it,’ yet?” Last week I spoke about the doubts of John the Baptist.²² Jesus responds to John by quoting the prophet Isaiah who, speaking of the Messiah, proclaimed: “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted. . . .”²³ Later, after Jesus speaks about being “Lord of the Sabbath” which, as I have just said, is thematically twinned with the “yoke of Jesus,” Matthew again cites Isaiah who repeats his summary of the *kind* of Messiah who is to come, one of gentleness and mercy. The LORD says through Isaiah: “Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope.”²⁴

Again, you hear of that authenticating divine spirit upon Jesus, and that reminds us of his baptism. In saying “A bruised reed he will not break, and a flicking candle he will not blow out” one recognizes that the Messiah comes *to rescue and save* and *not* to compound a person’s troubles with burdens – he comes to give *life*! He is going to bring about God’s restoration wherever it is needed by gently leading people into God’s healing love. Perhaps surprisingly, Isaiah’s oracle ends with “In *his name* the *non-Jews* will put their hope.”²⁵ Hope has a name; his name is Jesus. It is *not* the Torah, the law, that is the source of our hope, it is in Jesus the Messiah.²⁶ Someone greater than Moses is here!²⁷

Finally, John the Baptist’s message of repentance can’t simply be ignored, for his role was “to prepare the way for the Lord.”²⁸ But Jesus is in the forgiving business, and his joyful message must be celebrated and not damped down by legalistic restrictions.²⁹

Matthew asks of his readers: “Do you get it, yet?” Do we? “Whoever has ears, let them hear.”³⁰ Amen.

²² See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/It%E2%80%99s-OK-to-Doubt-It%E2%80%99s-Better-to-Hope.pdf>

²³ Isa 61:1. (See also Isa 35:5-6; Matt 11:4-6.)

²⁴ Matt 12:18-21. He cites Isa 42:1-4 (LXX) – not the Hebrew scriptures. Christians see this oracle as a messianic prophecy.

²⁵ Matt 12:21. See Isa 42:4 (LXX); the Hebrew text says: “and for *his law the coastlines* will wait.” See also Matt 28:19-20.

²⁶ See Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of the Scriptures in the Gospels*, (Baylor, 2015), 179-80.

²⁷ See Heb 3:3-6.

²⁸ See Mark 1:3; Matt 3:3; Isa 40:3.

²⁹ See Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, (IVP, 1990), 208-10.

³⁰ Matt 11:15.