

Matthew 11:20-24

I. Verse 20 – “Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.”

This verse tells us several things. The *goal* of Jesus’ works was repentance and salvation. This means that in all of Jesus’ mighty works, compassion and mercy were always at work. Jesus desired the salvation of the people. He desired that they would turn to God from their wickedness and unbelief. His mighty works were irrefutable proof of who He was and of the truth of His message (otherwise His denouncing of the people would have been unfair). The people *should have* repented and were without any excuse for not repenting. And this means that the people certainly *could have* repented if they had *wanted* to repent, without anything at all to stop them. And yet when confronted with the evidence of a compassionate and merciful Messiah, they refused to repent.

II. Verse 21a – “Woe to you...!”

These are familiar words from the Old Testament prophets, and the basic meaning is this: “How great is the judgment and suffering in store for you!” Jesus is not rejoicing in this judgment and suffering as though He delighted to make this announcement. When Jesus cries out “Woe to you!” He is mingling *pity* with a righteous announcement of *doom* (cf. Blomberg). If anything, even these words of woe were still calculated to move people to repentance.

- ✓ Isaiah 3:9, 11 – They proclaim their sin like Sodom; they do not hide it. Woe to them! *For they have brought evil on themselves...* Woe to the wicked!
- ✓ Jeremiah 4:31 – For I heard a cry as of a woman in labor, anguish as of one giving birth to her first child, the cry of the daughter of Zion gasping for breath, stretching out her hands, “Woe is me! I am fainting before murderers.”

This description is meant to elicit *pity* even for the city that was fully deserving of its torments. How can we not pity even the Hitler’s and John Wayne Gacy’s of the world when we understand the doom and woes that they must endure for the rest of eternity?

III. Verses 21 & 23 – “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes... And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.”

The point is simple. If God had sent a miracle-working prophet to the people of Tyre and Sidon, or even to the people of Sodom, to perform the mighty works that Jesus performed and to preach the word of God, they would have repented. They would have repented in sackcloth and ashes, weeping and mourning over their sin. But if Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom *would* have repented, *why* didn’t God send them a miracle-working prophet? There is a biblical answer to this question. But this answer will still leave us with impenetrable mystery.

First of all, we know that *God alone* is holy, wise, and just in *all* of His ways. There is no unrighteousness in God. But how can we say this in light of the fact that God never gave Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom even the *chance* to repent and believe in the Gospel of His grace? There are some who try to solve this problem by suggesting that many unbelievers will get into heaven because they would have believed if given the chance (“[unbelief] in Jesus... may not damn with certainty” Bruner). First of all, there is no biblical basis for this! Paul explicitly states that “all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law” (Rom. 2:12). Second of all, if God judges people based on what they would have done, then we lose any urgent motivation for evangelism and missions. And finally, even though Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom would have repented, the Bible is clear that they were still judged *purely* as unrepentant and wicked people (22, 24; cf. OT background). Jude 7 is clear that the people of Sodom were sentenced to the punishment of eternal fire. The people of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom will not inherit eternal life based on the fact that they would have repented.

Some have suggested that Jesus is really just saying that these cities would have been more *likely* to repent than the cities in Israel (France; cf. Calvin). Well, first of all this is not what Jesus says! Jesus explicitly states that Tyre and Sidon would have repented long ago, and that Sodom would have remained until His day. The suggestion that Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom would have been more likely to repent suggests that apart from God’s grace, they were somehow better and more deserving people than the citizens of Israel (but see Calvin’s explanation). But we can be sure that Jesus is not holding the citizens of Sodom up as an example of hearts that would have been more naturally tender to God and His word. First of all, this idea is completely contrary to the Gospel of God’s *free* grace (cf. Rom. 3:9; Eph. 2:8-9). But second of all, it still doesn’t solve the problem! If Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom were more likely to repent (and therefore better people by nature), then why didn’t God give them the chance to repent in order to “find out” if they would?*

Notice that Jesus doesn’t show any awareness that there might have been any problems in His day with what He said. He simply states as a matter of course that Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom *would have* repented, and apparently, no one feels the need to ask for clarification! But isn’t the “problem” obvious? How can Jesus just pass it over in silence? I think the reason is that His Jewish listeners would not have felt the need to ask the questions that we are asking. They knew that just because heathen Gentiles would have repented doesn’t mean they *deserved* any mercy. Just because Sodom would have repented doesn’t mean that Sodom *deserved* to see the miracles and hear the preaching that the people of Israel were privileged to hear.

* Some commentators ignore this issue entirely, while others just observe that the point of this passage is not to raise these kinds of idle and pointless speculations. First of all, I believe that the answer to this question *is* important to the correct interpretation of our text. I also believe that when Jesus spoke, He was fully aware of the implications of all that He said. Jesus always meant what He *implied* just as much as He meant what He said explicitly (this could not possibly be true of any other human being). Of course, we must carefully measure what we think are the implications of Jesus’ words with the teaching of the rest of Scripture. So let us seek to understand what Jesus teaches here by implication – not least of all so that we might proclaim the wonderful mystery of His perfect justice and His infinite mercy.

- ✓ Isaiah 23:8-9, 17 – Who has purposed this against Tyre... ? The LORD of hosts has purposed it, to defile the pompous pride of all glory, to dishonor all the honored of the earth... At the end of seventy years... she will return to her wages and will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the world.
- ✓ Ezekiel 26:2-4 – Son of man, because Tyre said concerning Jerusalem, “Aha, the gate of the peoples is broken; it has swung open to me. I shall be replenished, now that she is laid waste,” therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I am against you, O Tyre, and will bring up many nations against you, as the sea brings up its waves. They shall destroy the walls of Tyre and break down her towers, and I will scrape her soil from her and make her a bare rock.
- ✓ Ezekiel 28:22-23 – Thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, I am against you, O Sidon, and I will manifest my glory in your midst. And they shall know that I am the LORD when I execute judgments in her and manifest my holiness in her; for I will send pestilence into her, and blood into her streets; and the slain shall fall in her midst, by the sword that is against her on every side.
- ✓ Joel 3:4-8 (cf. Amos 1:9-10) – What are you to me, O Tyre and Sidon... ? Are you paying me back for something? If you are paying me back, I will return your payment on your own head swiftly and speedily. For you have taken my silver and my gold, and have carried my rich treasures into your temples. You have sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks.
- ✓ Genesis 19:4-5 – The men of the city, the men of Sodom, *both young and old, all the people to the last man*, surrounded the house. And they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.”
- ✓ Genesis 19:12-13 – Then the men [angels] said to Lot... “We are about to destroy this place, because *the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD.*”
- ✓ Ezekiel 16:49-50 – Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were *haughty* and did an *abomination* before me. So I removed them, when I saw it.
- ✓ Jude 7 – Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and *pursued* unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of *eternal* fire.

So *these* are the cities, and *these* are the people who *would have* repented! Why did God choose not to send a miracle working prophet to Tyre and Sidon, and Sodom? Ultimately, we don't know. This belongs to the secret plans and counsels of God (cf. Deut. 29:29). But one thing we do know. When God chose not to send anyone to Tyre and Sidon, and Sodom, His choice was perfectly *just*! On the other hand, God *did* send Jonah to Nineveh, the capital city of the wicked, and tyrannical, and brutally perverse Assyrians. So did Jonah say to himself: “Well, if God is sending me to Nineveh, then my guess is that *if* I go, they'll repent. And if they're the kind of people who will repent, then I guess they deserve to have me come”? Of course not! Humanly speaking, there was no one more unlikely to repent than the Assyrians. And the fact that they *will* repent *tomorrow* doesn't give them one shred of worthiness today – even to *hear* the message of repentance. God did not send Jonah to the Assyrians because He saw that they would repent. If that were the case, He would have sent someone to Tyre and Sidon, and Sodom as well. So then, *why* did God send Jonah to Nineveh? We'll let Jonah tell us why:

- ✓ Jonah 4:2 – [Jonah] prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a *gracious* God and *merciful*, *slow to anger* and *abounding in steadfast love*.”

Jonah knew that God is merciful. But Jonah also knew that Nineveh had no right at all to God’s mercy. God had *always* been a merciful God, though He had never before sent a prophet to Nineveh. On these points Jonah was correct, but he was wrong in seeking to deny God the *right* to be merciful to *whomever* He chooses.

- ✓ Jonah 4:10-11 – The LORD said [to Jonah]... “Should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

But there was another thing Jonah didn’t understand. Not only was Jonah wrong to deny God the right to be merciful to *whomever* He chooses, he was also wrong to assume that God was *obligated* to be merciful to him (cf. Jonah 4:5-9). Jonah was just as undeserving of God’s mercy as were the Assyrians!

- ✓ Romans 3:9 – Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are *under sin*.
- ✓ Romans 9:14-16, 18 – What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it depends not on human will or exertion [for then there would be no mercy], but on God, who has mercy... So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

If the people of Tyre and Sidon, and Sodom had possessed hearts willing to repent, but they were judged before they were ever given the chance to repent, then we might seriously struggle with understanding God’s justice and God’s love. But we have seen that in spite of the fact that they would have repented, there was not a shred of worthiness anywhere in the hearts of the people of Tyre and Sidon, and Sodom. Until the day of their destruction, they remained at complete enmity with God. So then, how do we explain the fact that these cities would have repented if this fact still leaves them completely unworthy to even hear the message of repentance?

When God saves, He uses *means*. And one of the most important means that God uses is a messenger to proclaim His word.

- ✓ Romans 10:14-15 – How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”

When God withheld the means from Tyre and Sidon, and Sodom, it was a sign of His just judgment. God chose to leave them in their sinful ignorance.

- ✓ Acts 14:16-17 – In past generations he allowed all the nations to *walk in their own ways*.

- ✓ Acts 17:30 – The *times of ignorance* God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent [now He sends the gospel even to the Gentiles].

But this ignorance is not the same thing as innocence!

- ✓ Ephesians 4:17-18 – You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, *due to their hardness of heart*.
- ✓ Romans 2:12, 14-15 – For all who have sinned without the law [in ignorance of God’s special revelation] will also perish without the law . . . For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts . . .
- ✓ Romans 1:18-20 – For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

By withholding the means (of a miracle-working prophet) from the people of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom, and leaving them in their ignorance, God was hardening their hearts (Rom. 9:18) – or we could say that He was justly turning them over to the hardness of their own hearts (Eph. 4:18). Aside from the case of Nineveh, we are aware of no other time in the Old Testament when God sent a prophet to preach God’s message of repentance to an entire Gentile city, and so we can assume that all of these cities ultimately experienced not God’s saving mercy, but rather His righteous judgment.

- ✓ Ephesians 2:11-12 – Remember that *at one time you Gentiles in the flesh*, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, *having no hope and without God in the world*.

So what I understand Jesus to be saying here in Matthew is that if God had chosen to send a miracle-working prophet to the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon, and Sodom, this would most certainly have been because it was God’s *will* to show His mercy to these people by saving them out of their vile wickedness and perversity. Of course, only Jesus could ever know this, but it does fit the pattern that the *one* and *only* time that God sent a prophet to a Gentile city (in the OT), that city repented and was saved. Now *wherever* God mercifully chooses to save, He also grants the gift of repentance.

- ✓ Acts 5:31 – God exalted [Jesus] at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.
- ✓ Acts 11:18 – They glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

So what was Jesus' point in telling Chorazin, and Bethsaida, and Capernaum that if the mighty works done in them had been done in Tyre and Sidon, and Sodom, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes? In a very dramatic and very shocking way, Jesus is telling the Israelites that their privileges could just as easily have been given to the Gentile cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom. And not only this, but these Gentile cities could just as easily have been saved by God's mercy as any person in Israel. In fact, Jesus knows that these cities *would have* been saved, because by the sovereign and miracle-working grace of God, they *would have* repented! But instead, God chose to manifest His *just* judgment on Tyre and Sidon, and Sodom because He did not send them any prophet to perform the mighty works that *would have been* the means to their repentance. What should this have produced in Israel? Humility, awe, wonder, and repentance.

IV. Verses 22 & 24 – “But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you... But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.

Jesus wants the Jews to know that not only could God have sent a miracle working prophet to Sodom, and not only could God just as easily have saved the people of Sodom as any person in Israel, but the fact that God left Sodom without any miracle working prophets means that in the day of judgment when they are sentenced to the eternal fires of hell, they will actually get off *easier* than the privileged people of Israel – because they will actually be less worthy of blame.

- ✓ Luke 12:47-48a – That servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating.

So once again, what's the point? Why does Jesus say these things? Jesus warns of the greater judgment because *He wants to move the people who hear Him – to repentance*. He would shock them and scare them out of their complacency, and by this *means* bring them to confess *their own* wickedness and cast *themselves* upon the free and sovereign mercies of God.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, we are objects of God's mercy – a mercy that was absolutely *sovereign* and *free*. God saved us when we were hating Him. When God saved us, *we* were His declared enemies. God would have been just and right to harden our hearts by withholding from us even the *means* of salvation and leaving us in our sinful ignorance. We were no more likely candidates for salvation than *anyone* else in the world. We are *debtors to mercy alone* – a mercy that was absolutely sovereign and free. If this doesn't kill and mortify our pride and produce in all of us a true *humility*, then nothing ever will. The fact that we have been shown mercy should be one of our greatest motivations to share the good news of that mercy with others. The fact that God saves *at all* means that He is able to save *anyone*. If you have not yet repented, *God is able* to save *you*. So repent and believe in Jesus, and in the death that He died in the place of sinners like you and me. But if you refuse to repent... woe to you! It will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for those who have never heard than for you.

God has blessed us with the mercies of holding in our hands His written word, hearing His word preached, gathering with His church, and partaking in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. There are many who, as time passes and familiarity grows, begin to respond to this abundance of mercy with an attitude of laziness and apathy. But the truth of the matter is that the *more* blessings and mercies we have received, the *more* diligently we should be striving to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

- ✓ Luke 12:48 – Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.

Young people: please don't respond to the merciful gift of a Christian upbringing with complacency. Adults: we must not respond to the merciful gifts of God's word and church with complacency.

- ✓ Romans 2:4 – Do [we] presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is [always!] meant to lead [us] to repentance?

May the mercies of a Christian upbringing and the gifts of God's word and church always be driving us forward to serve God with *everything* that is within us.

- ✓ Hebrews 6:7-8 – For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

As objects of the sovereign and free mercies of God, we are now *debtors* to that mercy, and we'll remain debtors for the rest of eternity.

Teaching our Children

1. Read Matthew 11:20-24
2. Based on this passage, discuss with your children the concept that increased privilege (experience of God's *mercy*) brings increased responsibility and accountability.
3. Think about those who will never hear the Gospel. They will still be worthy of condemnation (cf. Scriptures on page 5 beginning with Eph. 4 and ending with Eph. 2), but their condemnation will be less than those who heard the Gospel and refused to repent (See Luke 12:47-48 on page 6).
4. Reflect on the Scriptures on page 7.
5. Be careful to point out that we *cannot earn* any of God's mercies, but we are accountable to respond to God's mercies with repentant, grateful, and obedient hearts.
6. Exhort your children to repentance and faith, gratefulness, and obedience in light of the numerous mercies that they have experienced in their Christian upbringing.